Theology
The Basics

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Fourth Edition

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Preface

This short book aims to introduce you to the basics of Christian theology. The phrase "Christian theology" is used throughout this volume in the sense of the systematic study of the fundamental ideas of the Christian faith – in other words, a disciplined exploration of the contents of the Christian revelation. This way of thinking about theology is reflected in a number of definitions of theology offered by its leading practitioners, such as Karl Rahner (1904–84, Catholic), John Macquarrie (1919–2007, Anglican), and Karl Barth (1886–1968, Reformed).

> "Theology is the science of faith. It is the conscious and methodical explanation and explication of the divine revelation received and grasped in faith" (Karl Rahner).

> "Theology may be defined as the study which, through participation in and reflection upon a religious faith, seeks to express the content of this faith in the clearest and most coherent language available" (John Macquarrie).

> "Theology is science seeking the knowledge of the Word of God spoken in God's work – science learning in the school of the Holy Scripture, which witnesses to the Word of God; science laboring in the quest for truth, which is inescapably required of the community that is called by the Word of God" (Karl Barth).

Each of these descriptions of the nature and tasks of theology is helpful in getting a sense of its identity and focus. (Note that both Rahner and Barth are using the word "science" in the sense of an "intellectual

discipline.") While they differ in their emphases, these three defini-
tions have a lot in common. You might like to spend a few moments
reflecting on them, as you may find them useful in developing your
own views.

There are many reasons for wanting to think about the Chris-
tian faith in more detail. It allows Christians to have a deeper grasp
of the foundations, contents, and consequences of their faith. As the
eleventh-century theologian Anselm of Canterbury (ca. 1033–1109)
once remarked, theology is basically "faith seeking understanding." Part
of the inner dynamic of the life of faith is a desire to understand what
is believed. Theology can be thought of as the Christian's discipleship
of the mind. Yet theology is of importance beyond the Christian com-
munity. Those who are not Christians will be interested in learning
what Christians believe, and why.

For Christians, theological reflection can lead to personal enrich-
ment, and a deepened appreciation of their faith. For the great Christian
theologian Augustine of Hippo (354–430), there is a genuine intellec-
tual excitement to wrestling with God. He spoke of an "*eros* of the
mind" – a sense of longing to understand more about God's nature
and ways – and the transformative impact that this could have on peo-
ple's lives. Other Christian writers have stressed the practical impor-
tance of theology, noting how it is essential for the ministry of the
church. Preaching, spirituality, and pastoral care, many argue, are ulti-
mately grounded in theology. This business of "thinking about God"
takes place at many levels – in church study groups, in Bible studies,
through preaching, and in academic seminars. Yet the study of theology
has relevance beyond the Christian church. At least a basic understand-
ing of Christian theology will be invaluable to anyone studying western
cultural history, literature, or art.

It is important to avoid thinking of theology in terms of the study
of insulated intellectual compartments – such as the doctrine of cre-
ation, Christology, and eschatology. Christian beliefs are not a collec-
tion of individual, unrelated ideas. They are interconnected, like a web,
held together by the coherent vision of reality that lies at the heart of
the Christian faith. Theology involves understanding the relationship
between doctrines, not simply the doctrines themselves. For exam-
ple, the Christian understanding of the identity of Jesus Christ has

considerable implications for thinking about God and salvation (to mention only two obvious connections, to which others could easily be added).

This short, basic introduction to Christian theology is aimed specifically at those who are approaching it for the first time, and who feel intimidated by the thought of studying theology. It introduces you to some of its basic themes, problems, and personalities, and tries to whet your appetite to know more. There are severe limits to what can be dealt with in a short book like this, and many readers will find themselves frustrated by the brevity of some discussions, and the omission of much material that is so clearly relevant to its topics. Happily, there are plenty of other works that will be able to take your studies further. This book, which is perhaps best seen as a "taster" in Christian theology, will make specific suggestions about what you can do next, once you have finished this introduction.

I do not advocate any one specific form of Christian theology. No attempt is made to settle the longstanding disputes of Christian theology. Instead, you are introduced to them, and helped to understand the points at issue. Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism are all represented in this work. The work tries to avoid any form of denominational bias, and aims to treat all positions examined respectfully and fairly. My task is to introduce you to a wide variety of approaches to theology, to help you make up your own mind. The work is generous, both in terms of the range of Christian opinions noted, and the positive attitude adopted towards them. The approach adopted in this book has been tested on student audiences at Oxford University and elsewhere over many years, and I am grateful to those who have helped me evaluate it.

This book *aims* to introduce you to the basics of Christian theology. It *assumes* that you know nothing about the subject. It *introduces and explains* the following aspects of Christian theology:

- some of its leading ideas, as they are found in the Apostles' Creed – about which more presently;
- how those ideas were developed and justified;
- the basic vocabulary, especially technical terms, used in discussion of those ideas;

- some of the key debates that have influenced Christian thinking during the last two thousand years;
- some of the leading thinkers who have shaped Christian theology down the centuries.

It also encourages you to *interact* with these ideas, by helping you to engage with some texts dealing with these questions.

This is not a comprehensive textbook. It is selective, and focuses only on certain basic ideas. But by the time you have finished this book, you will be able to go on to deal with more advanced works in the field, including the two standard and comprehensive theological primers written by the present author: *Christian Theology: An Introduction* and *The Christian Theology Reader*. The former, now in its sixth edition, provides a thorough university-level introduction to Christian theology, including comprehensive coverage of the history of theology, the basics of theological method, and detailed engagement with ten major areas of theology. The latter, now in its fifth edition, provides more than 350 primary texts of relevance to the study of theology, along with individual introductions, commentary, and study questions. Although the present book is intended to be a brief introduction to the basic themes of Christian theology, you can also use it to lay the groundwork for a more detailed engagement with these two textbooks.

Theology: The Basics was written in response to many requests for a short and simple introduction to Christian theology. While many appreciated the comprehensiveness of *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, some found it too long and detailed. They wanted an overview, not a detailed analysis. The author and publisher both felt it was important to respond to these requests, and conceived *Theology: The Basics* as a sketch map of the landscape of Christian theology.

The scale of the success of this shorter work took both the publisher and author by surprise. When it became clear that the book was being much more widely used than we had anticipated, we decided as a matter of some urgency to commission detailed evaluation of the work by its end users. This has produced many helpful suggestions for improvements, some of which were incorporated into the second edition. As the numbers of users grew, a third edition was developed, which includes further significant improvements – most notably, a chapter dedicated to the theology of the Holy Spirit. It is our hope

that this fourth, further improved edition will prove to be an asset to those teaching and studying theology. We look forward to receiving feedback which will help us when the time comes to produce a fifth edition in due course. Please be assured that this work will continue in print for many years, and we will improve it steadily over time, while retaining its distinct characteristics of *brevity* and *simplicity*.

Users of this work may like to use it alongside a short collection of readings, designed to complement this textbook. *Theology: The Basic Readings*, now in its third edition, provides 68 readings, arranged in ten chapters, corresponding to the ten chapters of this work. This makes it an ideal resource to help you take your reflections further. Each reading is carefully introduced, to help you make sense of it and get the most out of engaging with it.

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The Development of Christian Theology: A Short Historical Overview

This short discussion gives you a basic overview of the main features of the development of Christian theology. It aims to help you get the most from the material in this work by highlighting some of the many themes of Christian theology over the last two thousand years – sadly passing over many topics, debates, schools of thought and topics that deserve inclusion here, yet have to be omitted for reasons for space. However, this sketch map of theological history will help you to get your bearings in the midst of this landscape of ideas.

The history of the first two thousand years of Christian thought is generally broken down into more manageable sections. While everyone has their own views about how best to divide Christian history, many use a framework which looks something like this.

The apostolic period

The first hundred years is often referred to as the *apostolic* period. This is the period during which the works now included in the New Testament were written. During this time, Christianity was spreading throughout the Mediterranean region and beyond. The missionary journeys of St Paul, described in the Acts of the Apostles, are an excellent example of this activity. This book does not include readings from the New Testament, as this document is so readily accessible.

The patristic period

The apostolic period is followed by what is still generally known as the *patristic* period (some now prefer to refer to this as the "period of the early church"), which is usually held to begin about the year 100. There is no firm agreement about when this period ended: some scholars suggest it ends in the fifth century, while others extend it by at least two centuries. The Council of Chalcedon (451) marked a land-mark in Christian thinking, especially over the identity of Jesus Christ, and is seen by many writers as bringing this important period of the-ological development to a close. The unusual word "patristic" derives from the Greek word *pater* ("father"), and designates a group of writers who are often collectively known as the "fathers of the church." (Sadly, there were very few women among them.) The major writers of this period include Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, the Cappadocian fathers, Athanasius, and Augustine of Hippo.

The patristic period witnessed important theological explorations of the relation of faith and classical culture, clarifying the place of the Bible in Christian theology (including establishing the New Testament canon), the identity of Jesus Christ, the doctrine of God (including the Trinity), the doctrine of the church, and the relation of grace and free will. In what follows, we will look at each of these in a little more detail.

Faith and classical culture

As Christianity expanded in its first centuries, it moved from a Pales-tinian context into the Greek-speaking world of the eastern Mediter-ranean, establishing a presence in the great cities of Alexandria and Antioch. It also began to grow in the western Latin-speaking Roman empire, including North Africa. This raised the question of how Chris-tianity related to ideas already present in this region – for example, classic philosophy.

The place of the Bible

One of the most important achievements of the patristic period was establishing which books dating from the apostolic period were to be

regarded as "canonical" or "biblical." Considerable attention was also paid to the question of how the Bible was to be interpreted, and especially the role of tradition in combating unorthodox interpretations of the Bible. During this period, "creeds" – such as the "Apostles' Creed," on which this textbook is loosely based – began to emerge as communally accepted and authorized summaries of the Christian faith.

The identity of Jesus Christ

The patristic period saw clarification of the identity and significance of Jesus as being of the utmost importance. Where was he to be placed on a theological map? The period witnessed growing acceptance of the "two natures" doctrine, along with exploration of how best to make sense of Jesus Christ being both divine and human. The Arian and Nestorian debates were of particular importance in clarifying this matter.

The doctrine of God

Classical Greek philosophy already had its ideas about what "God" was like. One of the most important tasks of Christian theology was to distinguish the Christian idea of God from its pagan and philosophical rivals. Many early debates concentrated on what it meant to say that God was creator, the role of the Holy Spirit, or how the existence of evil was consistent with a good God. However, the most significant discussions concerned the doctrine of the Trinity – the distinctively Christian idea of one God in three persons. How was this to be understood?

The doctrine of the church

Patristic writers initially paid relatively little attention to the doctrine of the church, tending to focus attention on developing a coherent understanding of the sacraments. The Donatist controversy of the fourth century forced the western church to reconsider the nature of the church, and who was authorized to administer the sacraments. These debates would break out once more during the Reformation period.

The doctrine of grace

Although the Greek-speaking church made significant contributions to early Christian reflections on human nature and grace, the most sustained engagement with these issues took place within the western church, largely as a result of the Pelagian controversy between Pelagius and Augustine of Hippo.

The Middle Ages

The Middle Ages, or medieval period, is regarded as extending from the end of the patristic era to about the year 1500. This long period was immensely creative culturally, and productive theologically, producing theological classics such as Peter Lombard's *Four Books of the Sentences* and Thomas Aquinas's great thirteenth-century work, the *Summa Theologiae*. Peter Lombard's medieval theological textbook was the subject of many commentaries, which used its material to develop increasingly sophisticated theological ideas. Major theologians of this era include Anselm of Canterbury, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham.

Among the many issues to be explored in detail during this period were the relation between faith and reason, how to interpret the Bible, and the theology of the sacraments. Alongside this, there was continuing exploration of issues debated during the patristic period, such as the relation of grace and free will.

Faith and reason

The Middle Ages saw new attention being given to a whole range of issues concerning the relation of faith and reason, theology and philosophy. One reason for this was the emergence of universities in western Europe, particularly the University of Paris. The debates over whether God's existence could be proved are good examples of this concern.

Biblical interpretation

The rise of the monasteries led to a new interest in the correct interpretation of the Bible. The constant monastic use of the Bible in corporate

worship and private devotion led to reflection on how the Bible was best to be understood and applied.

The institution of the church

The rise of the papacy raised increasingly important questions about the church and its sacramental system. Major issues debated during the Middle Ages included the definition of a sacrament and the question of how Christ could be considered to be present in the eucharist.

The relation of grace and free will

In many ways, medieval theology can be seen as an extended commentary on Augustine's theology. It is therefore not surprising that the relation of grace and human freedom should emerge as important at this time.

The Reformation and post–Reformation period

The sixteenth century marked a period of radical change in the western church. This period of *reformation* witnessed the birth of Protestantism, through writers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin. Certain theological debates became especially heated around this time, especially the place of the Bible in theological reflection, the doctrine of the church, and the question of what it is necessary to do in order to be saved. The Catholic church also went through a period of reformation around this time, with the Council of Trent setting out the definitive Catholic position on issues of importance at this point. Many scholars also include the seventeenth century in this period of reformation, arguing that this represents the Protestant and Catholic consolidation of the developments that began in the previous century. It was during this century that Christians emigrated to North America, and began to establish that region as a major player in theological debates.

A number of significant theological developments take place during this period, most of which relate to Protestantism. Two new styles of theological texts make their appearance, both generally (though not exclusively) associated with Lutheranism and Calvinism

respectively – Philip Melanchthon's *Loci Communes* ("Common-places") and John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The "Catechism," with its distinctive "question and answer" format, became of major importance at this time in theological education. The theological debates of this period were often quite intense, focusing especially on the interpretation and authority of the Bible, the nature of the church, and the doctrine of grace. In each case, Protestants and Catholics found themselves adopting very different positions.

The authority of the Bible

A major debate between Protestants and Catholics concerned whether, in the first place, the Bible had an authority independent of that of the church; and in the second, whether the Bible could be interpreted without the guidance of the church.

The church

Three major debates concerning the church became of particular importance around this time. In the first place, what were the marks of the true church? Was the church defined by institutional, historical continuity with the past – or by the faithful preaching of the gospel. Second, how many sacraments were there? Protestants tended to identify only two gospel sacraments; the Catholic church recognized seven. Third, in what sense, if any, was Christ present at the eucharist? The Catholic church maintained its commitment to the specific doctrine of transubstantiation, while various viewpoints emerged within Protestantism.

The doctrine of grace

The Reformation brought new controversy over the doctrine of grace. This was expressed in a number of ways, including Protestantism's distinctive doctrine of "justification by faith alone," which was strongly resisted by Catholicism. A further debate broke out within Protestantism over predestination, focusing on the teaching of John Calvin on this issue.

The modern era

The period since about 1800 is often referred to as the "modern era." This was a period of considerable instability in western Europe, especially following the French Revolution of 1789, and later through the rise of Marxism in eastern Europe in the twentieth century. Despite these anxieties, it was a period of remarkable theological creativity throughout western Europe and North America. In addition, a growing Christian presence in Africa and Asia during the twentieth century led to an increasing interest in developing "local theologies" in these new regions. These local theologies would be grounded in the Christian tradition, but be sensitive to their local situations. Although this textbook cannot hope to document the emergence of these distinctive theologies outside the west, there is no doubt that this has been a development of major importance, which will become increasingly significant in the twenty-first century.

A wide range of theological issues came to the fore during the modern period. Many traditional issues continued to be debated, including the relation of faith and reason, the authority and interpretation of scripture, the doctrine of the Trinity, the identity of Christ, the nature and grounds of redemption, and the nature of the church. In most cases, these debates were shaped by the concerns of the Enlightenment, which stressed the importance of reason, and was generally suspicious of theological arguments involving an appeal to church tradition or divine revelation. The decline of the Enlightenment and the rise of postmodernity has raised new issues for theology, which seem set continue to be discussed in the future.

A growing awareness of the existence of other religions led to a new interest in clarifying the relationship of Christianity and other faiths. This issue has been discussed to a far greater extent, and with far greater intensity, in the twentieth century than in any previous period of history.

The rise of rationalism within western culture led to a critique of a number of aspects of traditional Christian theology. The most important of these was the rise of the "historical Jesus movement" as a result of the belief that there was a massive gap between an essentially simple, rational "Jesus of history," and the church's rather more complex "Christ of faith." Yet Enlightenment rationalism itself came under

critical scrutiny in the late twentieth century, as postmodernity challenged some of its core ideas – with important theological consequences. As rationalism began to lose its influence in the early twentieth century, Christian theology began to rediscover the importance of revelation, and to regain confidence in the doctrine of the Trinity as a means of expressing the distinctive identity of the Christian God.

A final factor of importance has been the growing realization of the significance of issues raised by feminist writers, who have pointed out the need to explore further issues relating to the traditional use of male language about God, the maleness of Christ as the central figure of the Christian faith, or essentially masculine approaches to biblical interpretation or theological concepts.

This very brief survey of theological history can only skim the surface of some of the great themes that were explored and debated during Christian history. It is hoped that it will help you appreciate and begin to engage with the issues considered in the ten main chapters.

The Apostles' Creed

This book is loosely modeled on the Apostles' Creed, one of the most familiar and widely cited summaries of the Christian faith. It is regularly included in public worship, and is often the subject of sermons, textbooks, and study guides. Its simple structure creates an ideal framework for exploring some of the central themes of Christian theology. Many users of this book will be taking part in church or college study groups, making the Apostles' Creed is an obvious reference point for discussion. Many colleges teach courses in basic Christian doctrine using the Apostles' Creed to frame the lectures.

Although many earlier versions of the Apostles' Creed are known, this creed reached its final form in the eighth century.

> I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
> creator of heaven and earth.
>
> I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
> who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
> born of the Virgin Mary,
> suffered under Pontius Pilate,
> was crucified, died, and was buried;
> he descended to the dead.
> On the third day he rose again;
> he ascended into heaven,
> he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
> and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

Getting Started

Theology is "talk about God"; Christian theology is "talk about God" from a Christian perspective. It begins by recognizing that Christians have quite distinct ideas about who God is and what God is like. We find these expressed in the Bible, which all Christians regard as being of immense importance to matters of faith, despite differences of interpretation and emphasis. Christian theology can be seen both as the *process* of reflecting on the Bible and weaving together its ideas and themes, and as the *result* of this process of reflection in certain ideas – ideas that are often referred to as "doctrines" (from the Latin word *doctrina*, meaning "teaching").

There are also other documents which Christians regard with great respect, such as the "creeds." The word "creed" comes from the Latin word *credo*, meaning "I believe." A creed is basically a brief statement of the main points of the Christian faith. The best known of these are the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. (The term "Nicene Creed" actually refers to a slightly later modification of the creed set out by the Council of Nicea, more accurately known as the "Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed.") These ancient creeds set out some of the basics of the faith, and are often used widely for teaching purposes. Many theologians would argue that Christian theology is the exploration of the basic ideas of these creeds, investigating their basis in the Bible, and their impact on Christian thinking and living.

A topical approach to studying theology

So how do we go about studying theology? *Theology: The Basics* adopts a topical approach to studying theology. It considers ten broad areas of Christian theology, all of which are interesting and relevant. The themes are arranged in a way that broadly follows the structure of the Apostles' Creed, with a few minor adjustments to ensure the most effective presentation of the material. For example, the doctrine of the Trinity (chapter 7) is located relatively late in the work so that it can integrate some core themes discussed in the chapters on God (chapter 2), Jesus (chapter 4), and the Holy Spirit (chapter 6). Each of these chapters aims to provide a brief introduction to these themes. It is very likely that you will feel the need for more detailed discussion of many points, which you can find in the more comprehensive work *Christian Theology: An Introduction*.

This topical approach to studying theology has many advantages. There are, however, other ways of studying theology. Some people prefer to study a very limited number of theologians, and see what kind of approach they adopt. They focus down on a few representative theologians, and use them as gateways to the study of theology as a whole. How do they develop their ideas? How do they assess arguments? How do they use the Bible and other theologians in their approach? Two theologians from the classic era of Christian theology are particularly popular here:

- Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225–74), a great theologian of the Middle Ages, whose *Summa Theologiae* (Latin: The "Totality of Theology") is one of the most admired works of systematic theology.
- John Calvin (1509–64), whose *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is a landmark in Protestant theology.

In the twentieth century, two theologians are often singled out as being of especial interest:

- The Protestant writer Karl Barth (1886–1968), whose *Church Dogmatics* is often regarded as the most important theological publication of this period.

- The Catholic theologian Karl Rahner (1904–84), whose *Theological Investigations* reestablished the short theological essay as a major way of conducting theological debate and exploration.

This approach has many merits. It does, however, make considerable demands on students. For a start, the writings of these theologians are often rather long. In addition, you need to know a lot of background material before you can really make sense of them. Anyway, why limit the study of theology to such a small range of figures? Surely a more representative range of theologians would be more appropriate?

Other writers suggest that a *historical* approach is better. This means looking at the history of Christian theology, and seeing how it developed down the ages. Instead of focusing on a single individual, this approach allows students to see how Christian thinking has evolved. Again, it is a good way of doing theology. It helps us to understand, for example, that there are a number of phases or stages to the development of Christian theology. This book provides a brief overview of the history of theology, as this is helpful in making sense of some of the questions that will be discussed.
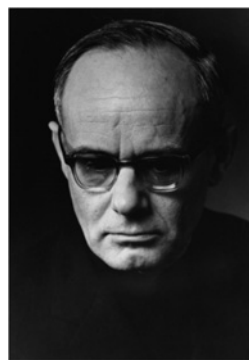
Figure 1 Karl Rahner (1904–84) © Bettmann/Corbis.

Yet a purely historical approach makes huge demands on students. Two thousand years of history take a long time to master! While studying the history of theology is a fascinating thing to do, it needs to be done in much greater depth than this brief work allows. Yet this approach has a further weakness: it suggests that theology is the study of *theologians*. It's not. It is the study of Christian *ideas*, which is helped by looking at how individual theologians understand those ideas. The theologian is not a "professional rememberer," who answers questions merely by reproducing the earlier answers of Augustine, Aquinas, or Luther; rather, the theologian is someone who explores ideas in the company of other theologians, who can help the process of understanding and application.

The topical approach used in *Theology: The Basics* considers individual subject areas – such as the nature of faith, or the doctrine of

the church, broadly following the pattern of the Apostles' Creed. This approach involves looking at a number of areas of Christian thought, and exploring what Christian theologians have said about them and how they developed those ideas. This will help you to develop tools to think for yourself about theological issues, rather than just learning what certain great theologians have thought about them. And it allows you to look at a wide range of theologians – such as Athanasius, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Karl Barth, and Karl Rahner.

Any serious engagement with theology is going to involve examining specific theological topics and individual theologians, as well as the general history of the discipline. However, a short book like this cannot hope to do justice to the complexities of individual thinkers or history. Yet the topical approach being used will allow us to look at the history of a debate, where this is relevant to the topic being discussed – and also at individual theologians, when they have a particular contribution to make to the discussion. This volume provides three useful additional resources to help with this process of interaction: a brief glossary of theological terms, and the biographical details of the major theologians mentioned in the text. The sources of all extracted citations are also provided, to allow readers to explore them in more detail in their proper contexts.

Before we begin to look at Christian theology in more detail, we need to think about the basic sources of theology. Throughout its long history, Christian theology has made an appeal to three fundamental resources: the Bible, tradition, and reason. The topical approach allows us to explore the place of each of these resources in theological debate. In view of their importance, we shall examine each in further detail, before moving on to our first topic.

Introducing the Bible

The word "Bible" comes from the Greek word *biblia* ("books"). It refers to a collection of books which Christians regard as having authority in matters of thought and life. The Bible is divided into two major sections, known as the *Old Testament* and *New Testament*.

The term "Old Testament" is used by Christian writers to refer to those books of the Christian Bible which were (and still are) regarded

as sacred by Judaism. Christians understand and value the Old Testament as setting the scene for the coming of Jesus Christ, who brings its leading themes and institutions to fulfillment. This collection of texts is sometimes also referred to as "the Hebrew Bible" or the "Tanakh" – an acronym of the Hebrew words for "law, prophets, and writings (*torah*, *nevi'im*, *ketuvim*)."

The theological term "testament" is to be understood as meaning a "covenant" or "dispensation." The basic idea is that the same God who once entered into a covenant with the people of Israel (the "old covenant") has now entered into a "new covenant" with all of humanity, leading to the emergence of the Christian church. The basic points here are:

1. The same God who called the people of Israel also called the Christian church. Both are "chosen peoples," to use the biblical language.
2. A new phase in God's dealings with humanity came about in Jesus Christ. This is usually referred to as a "new covenant" or "new dispensation."

This has important implications for the way in which Christians read the Old Testament. For Christians, the Old Testament anticipates the coming of Christ. This idea is regularly developed in the New Testament. If you would like to explore this briefly, read the first two chapters of the gospel according to Matthew, the first book of the New Testament, and try answering these two questions:

1. How many times does a phrase like "this took place to fulfill the prophecy of …" occur in these two chapters?
2. Why do you think that Matthew regards it as so important that Jesus Christ fulfills Old Testament prophecy?

There is widespread agreement within Christianity that the Bible has a place of especial importance in theological debate and personal devotion. All the Protestant confessions of faith stress the centrality of the Bible in relation to Christian thought and life. More recently, the Second Vatican Council (1962–5) reaffirmed its importance for Catholic theology and preaching. The authority of the Bible is seen as linked with the idea of "inspiration" – in other words, that in some way, the words of the Bible convey the words of God. This is stated clearly

by most Protestant confessions of faith, such as the "Gallic Confession of Faith" (1559), which includes the following declaration:

> We believe that the Word contained in these books has proceeded from God, and receives its authority from him alone, and not from human beings.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992) sets out a similar position:

> God is the author of Sacred Scripture. The divine revealed realities, which are contained and presented in the text of Sacred Scripture, have been written down under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. For Holy Mother Church, relying on the faith of the apostolic age, accepts as sacred and canonical the books of the Old and the New Testaments, whole and entire, with all their parts, on the grounds that, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself. God inspired the human authors of the sacred books.

There are some disagreements within Christianity over exactly what is included in the Bible. The most important of these concerns a group of works usually referred to as "the Apocrypha" (from the Greek word for "hidden") or as "Deuterocanonical works." This includes books such as the Wisdom of Solomon and the book of Judith. These books, though dating from the period of the Old Testament, were not originally written in the Hebrew language, and are thus not included in Jewish or Hebrew Bibles.

Protestants tend to regard these "apocryphal" books as interesting and informative, but not as being of doctrinal importance. Catholics and Orthodox Christians, on the other hand, regard them as part of the text of the Bible. This difference is reflected in the way in which Protestant and Catholic Bibles are laid out. Protestant Bibles – such as the famous King James Bible of 1611 or the New International Version – include these texts as a third section of the Bible, known as the "Apocrypha." Catholic Bibles – such as the Jerusalem Bible – include them within the Old Testament section of the Bible.

Tradition

A series of controversies in the early church brought home the importance of the concept of "tradition." The word "tradition" comes from the Latin term *traditio* which means "handing over," "handing down," or "handing on." It is a thoroughly biblical idea; for example, St. Paul reminded his readers that he was handing on to them core teachings of the Christian faith which had been handed on to him by other people (1 Corinthians 15:1–4).

The term "tradition" can refer to both the *action* of passing teachings on to others – something which Paul insists must be done within the church – and to the *body* of teachings which are passed on in this way. Tradition can thus be understood as a *process* as well as a *body of teaching*. The Pastoral Epistles (three New Testament letters that are particularly concerned with questions of church structure, and the passing on of Christian teaching: 1 Timothy; 2 Timothy; Titus) in particular stress the importance of "guarding the good deposit which was entrusted to you" (2 Timothy 1:14). The New Testament also uses the notion of "tradition" in a negative sense, meaning something like "human ideas and practices which are not divinely authorized." Thus Jesus Christ was openly critical of certain human traditions within Judaism (e.g., see Matthew 15:1–6; Mark 7:13).

The importance of the idea of tradition first became obvious in a controversy which broke out during the second century. The "Gnostic controversy" centered on a number of questions, including how salvation was to be achieved. (The word "Gnostic" derives from the Greek word *gnosis*, "knowledge," and refers to the movement's belief in certain secret ideas that had to be known in order to secure salvation.) Christian writers found themselves having to deal with some highly unusual and creative interpretations of the Bible. How were they to deal with these? If the Bible was to be regarded as authoritative, was every interpretation of the Bible to be regarded as of equal value?

Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 130–ca. 200), one of the church's greatest early theologians, did not think so. Heretics, he argued, interpreted the Bible according to their own taste. Orthodox believers, in contrast, interpreted the Bible in ways that their apostolic authors would have approved. What was handed down from the apostles through the

church was not merely the biblical texts themselves, but a certain way of reading and understanding those texts.

> Everyone who wishes to perceive the truth should consider the apostolic tradition, which has been made known in every church in the entire world. We are able to number those who are bishops appointed by the apostles, and their successors in the churches to the present day, who taught and knew nothing of such things as these people imagine.

Irenaeus's point is that a continuous stream of Christian teaching, life, and interpretation can be traced from the time of the apostles to his own period. The church is able to point to those who have maintained the teaching of the church, and to certain public standard creeds which set out the main lines of Christian belief. Tradition is thus the guarantor of faithfulness to the original apostolic teaching, a safeguard against the innovations and misrepresentations of biblical texts on the part of the Gnostics.

This important development underlies the emergence of "creeds" – public, authoritative statements of the basic points of the Christian faith, which are based upon the Bible, but avoid maverick interpretations of biblical material. This point was further developed in the early fifth century by Vincent of Lérins (died before 450), who was concerned that certain doctrinal innovations were being introduced without good reason. There was a need to have public standards by which such doctrines could be judged. So what standard was available, by which the church could be safeguarded from such errors? For Vincent, the answer was clear – tradition. For Vincent, tradition was "a rule for the interpretation of the prophets and the apostles in such a way that is directed by the rule of the universal church."

Creeds

Having noted the importance of creeds, we may explore how they came about in their present forms. Their emergence was stimulated by two factors of especial importance:

1. The need for public statements of faith which could be used in teaching, and defense of the Christian faith against misrepresentations.
2. The need for personal "confessions of faith" at the time of baptism.

We have already touched on the first point; the second needs further exploration. It is known that the early church attached especial importance to the baptism of new members. In the third and fourth centuries, a definite pattern of instruction and baptism developed: new members of the church were instructed in the basics of the Christian faith during the period of Lent, and baptized on Easter Day. These new members of the church were asked to confirm their faith by assenting to key statements of Christian belief.

According to the *Apostolic Tradition*, a work written by Hippolytus of Rome (died ca. 236) in the early years of the third century, three questions were put to each baptismal candidate: "Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty? Do you believe in Jesus Christ, our Savior? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy church, and the forgiveness of sins?" As time went on, the answers to these questions were gradually enlarged into a statement of faith, which each candidate was asked to affirm.

The most important creed to emerge from these "baptismal creeds" is the "Apostles' Creed," which is widely used in Christian worship today. Traditionally, this creed is set out as twelve statements, each of which is attributed to one the twelve apostles. Although it is now widely agreed that this creed was not actually written by the apostles themselves, it is nevertheless "apostolic" in the sense that it contains the main ideas of the Christian faith that the church received from those apostles. The present form of the creed can be traced to the eighth century. In its present form (as set out earlier), it consists of three parts, corresponding to the three questions that Hippolytus reports as being asked of baptismal candidates back in the third century. Although each of the questions has been expanded, the same basic structure can still be identified.

The Apostles' Creed offers a very convenient summary of some of the main topics of the Christian faith, and we shall regularly use it as a basis for discussion throughout this book.

Reason

Finally, we need to note the importance of reason in Christian theology. Traditionally, Christian theology has seen reason as operating in

a subservient role to revelation. Thomas Aquinas argued that supernatural truths needed to be revealed to us. Human reason, on its own, could not hope to gain access to divine mysteries. It could, however, reflect on them, once they had been revealed. This has been the position adopted by most Christian theologians. Reason allows us to reflect on revelation – but it must be used critically.

This critical yet positive attitude towards human reason can be found throughout the writings of Augustine of Hippo, perhaps the most important and influential writer of the Latin west. Augustine's argument is that human reason, and philosophies based upon it, have much to offer theology – provided they are not used uncritically. He uses an interesting biblical analogy to make this point. When the people of Israel left Egypt at the time of the exodus, they took with them many "treasures of the Egyptians." Using the exodus as a model, Augustine argues that there is no reason why Christians should not extract all that is good in philosophy, and put it to the service of preaching the gospel. Just as Israel left behind the burdens of Egypt, while carrying off its treasures, so theology can discard what is useless in philosophy, and exploit what is good and useful.

> If those who are called philosophers, particularly the Platonists, have said anything which is true and consistent with our faith, we must not reject it, but claim it for our own use … The Egyptians possessed idols and heavy burdens, which the children of Israel hated and from which they fled; however, they also possessed vessels of gold and silver and clothes which our forebears, in leaving Egypt, took for themselves in secret, intending to use them in a better manner (Exodus 3:21–2; 12:35–6) … In the same way, pagan learning is not entirely made up of false teachings and superstitions … It contains also some excellent teachings, well suited to be used by truth, and excellent moral values.

Augustine's attitude shaped much of the Christian discussion of the place of reason until the early modern period.

All this changed during the great "Age of Reason" in western culture, which most historians suggest is to be dated to the two hundred years between 1750 and 1950. This era saw a new confidence in the capacity of unaided human reason to explain and master the world. Reason, it was argued, was capable of deducing anything that

needed to be known about God. There was no need to propose divine revelation. Instead, we could rely totally upon reason. This position is generally known as "rationalism," and is still encountered today in some quarters. However, its credibility has been severely shaken on account of the growing realization that different cultures have different under-standings of rationality. Reason, it turned out, was not the universal quality that many rationalists believed it to be. As the great Florentine poet Dante Alighieri (ca. 1265–1321) noted, reason has "short wings."

There is, of course, continued interest today in the role of reason in theology. The most obvious sign of this is the ongoing debate over "arguments for the existence of God." Although it is very much open to question whether these arguments prove very much, let alone the existence of the Christian god, the fact that there is so much interest in them demonstrates that there is a continuing role for reason in the-ological debate. We shall consider some of these arguments briefly at a later point in this volume.

We now turn to consider one of the most interesting aspects of the relation of faith and reason – the use of "helpmates" or "dialogue part-ners" in theology, often referred to using the Latin term *ancilla theologiae*, which literally means "a handmaid of theology."

The "handmaid": dialogue between theology and culture

There is a long tradition within Christian theology of drawing on intel-lectual resources outside the Christian tradition as a means of develop-ing a theological vision. This approach (which, as we noted, is usually referred to using the Latin phrase *ancilla theologiae*) is grounded in the basic idea that philosophical systems can be a very helpful way of stimu-lating theological development, and enabling a dialogue to be opened up between Christian thinkers and their cultural environment. The two most important historical examples of this approach to theology are the dialogues with Platonism and Aristotelianism.

The dialogue with Platonism was of immense importance during the first five centuries of the Christian church, especially in the Greek-speaking world of the eastern Mediterranean. As Christianity expanded in that region, it encountered rival worldviews, of which Platonism

Figure 2   Detail from *The School of Athens* by Raphael (1483–1520), showing the great ancient Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle. Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican. Photo Scala, Florence.

was the most important. Such worldviews could be seen positively or negatively: they were both an opportunity for dialogue and intellectual development, and also a threat to the existence of Christianity. The task faced by writers such as Justin Martyr (ca. 100–ca. 165) or Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–ca. 215) was how to make use of the obvious intellectual merits of Platonism in constructing a Christian worldview, without compromising the integrity of Christianity itself. After all, despite their occasional similarities, Christianity is *not* Platonism.

A new debate opened up in the thirteenth century, during the golden age of scholastic theology. The rediscovery of Aristotle by medieval writers seemed to offer new resources to help in every aspect of intellectual life, including physics, philosophy, and ethics. It was

inevitable that theologians should also want to see what use they could make of Aristotelian ideas and methods in constructing a systematic theology – such as Thomas Aquinas's massive *Summa Theologiae*, widely regarded as one of the greatest works of theology ever written.

In both these cases, using another intellectual discipline as the *ancilla theologiae* offers opportunities and risks in about equal measure. It is clearly important to appreciate what these opportunities and risks are. The two major *opportunities* offered to theology by the critical appropriation of another discipline can be summarized as follows.

1. It allows for a much more rigorous exploration of ideas than would otherwise be possible. Problems that Christian theology encounters in trying to develop its ideas often have their parallels in other disciplines. Thomas Aquinas, for example, found Aristotle's notion of an "unmoved mover" helpful in setting out some reasons for defending the existence of God.

2. It allows Christian theology to engage in a dialogue with another worldview – a major element of the church's witness to its secular context. In the second century, Justin Martyr clearly believed that many Platonists would be so impressed by the parallels between Platonism and Christianity that they might consider conversion. Similarly, in his "Areopagus address" (Acts 17:22–31), Paul draws on some themes from Stoic philosophy in attempting to communicate the Christian message to Athenian culture.

Yet alongside these positive aspects of such an engagement, an obvious risk must also be noted – that ideas which are not distinctively Christian come to play a significant (perhaps even decisive) role in Christian theology. For example, Aristotelian ideas about the proper manner of logical reasoning, or Cartesian ideas about the proper starting point for any intellectual discipline, might find their way into Christian theology. On some occasions, this might turn out to be a neutral development; on others, it may eventually be recognized to have negative implications, undermining the integrity of Christian theology, and ultimately causing it to be distorted. Martin Luther, the great German reformer, argued that medieval theology had allowed a number of such distortions to arise through an excessive, and partially uncritical, use of Aristotelian ideas in the Middle Ages.

Despite these concerns, the approach continues to be widely used. Many German theologians of the nineteenth century found G. W. F.

Hegel (1770–1831) and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) to be helpful dialogue partners. In the twentieth century, Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) and Paul Tillich (1886–1965) both found a dialogue with existentialism to be theologically productive. More recently, I myself have argued that the working methods and assumptions of the natural sciences can be theologically significant and helpful (see my three-volume work *A Scientific Theology*).

Moving on …

Now that we have looked at some preliminary questions about the nature and sources of theology, we are ready to begin studying theology seriously. So where shall we begin? The obvious place is to consider what it means to say that someone has faith in God. The Apostles' Creed opens with the words "I believe." So what does this mean? And what issues does it raise? Let's begin to explore these questions.

CHAPTER 1

Faith

"I believe in God." This opening phrase of the Creeds leads us directly into our first theological topic. What does it mean to talk about "believing in God"? What are we to understand by words such as "belief" and "faith"? Christian theologians have never seen faith simply in terms of intellectual assent to Christian belief. It is a matter of the heart, not simply the mind, involving personal commitment. As the English theologian William Temple (1881–1944) once pointed out: "Faith is not only the assent of our minds to doctrinal propositions: it is the commitment of our whole selves into the hands of a faithful Creator and merciful Redeemer."

What is faith?

So what are we to understand by these basic theological terms "belief" and "faith"? Let's begin by noting two different senses of the word "faith." Christian theologians have traditionally made a distinction between faith as *a set of beliefs*, and faith as *an act of believing*. Two Latin phrases are often used in the theological literature to express this difference between the *content* of faith, and the human *act* of faith.

1. *Fides quae creditur* (which can be loosely translated as "the faith we believe"). This refers to an objective set of beliefs, such as those set out in the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed. These are understood to provide an outline of the basic beliefs of the Christian faith.

2. *Fides qua creditur* (which can be loosely translated as "the faith by which we believe"). This refers to a subjective act of trust or assent, by which individual believers accept and appropriate the basic ideas of the Christian faith.

The relationship between these objective and subjective aspects of faith is regularly discussed in works of theology. There is a general consensus within Christian theology, transcending denominational divisions, that both these elements are part of a proper understanding of faith. Faith affects the human mind, heart, and will. Consider, for example, this statement from an early twentieth-century Anglican theologian:

> [Faith] affects the whole of [human] nature. It commences with the conviction of the mind based on adequate evidence; it continues in the confidence of the heart or emotions based on conviction, and it is crowned in the consent of the will, by means of which the conviction and confidence are expressed in conduct.

This definition of faith would command wide support across Christian theology, weaving together the core elements of the characteristic Christian understanding of faith. Note how it links together intellectual conviction, trusting confidence, and informed conduct.

One of the core elements of faith is an attitude of informed trust in God, which stands at the heart of the Old Testament account of the calling of Abraham (Genesis 15:1–6). This tells of how God promised to give Abraham countless descendants, as numerous as the stars of the night sky. Abraham believed God – that is, he trusted the promise that was made to him. Similarly, the crowds around Jesus Christ are often described as having "faith" – meaning that they believed that he had some special status, identity, or authority, and would be able to heal them from their illnesses, or deal with their concerns (e.g., Luke 5:20; 17:19). Here again the basic idea is trust, in this case mingled with discernment that there is something about Jesus which merits such an attitude of trust.

In everyday language, words like "faith" and "belief" have come to mean something like "a weak form of knowledge." I know that the chemical formula for water is H_2O, or that the earth rotates around the sun. When I say "I know" that "the capital of the United States of America is Washington, DC," I mean that this statement can be verified.

But when I say "I believe in God," I would be understood to mean something like "I think that there is a God, but I cannot demonstrate this with any degree of certainty."

This everyday use of the terms "faith" and "belief" is misleading, however, as it does not do justice to the complexity of the theological notion of "faith." In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, western philosophy widely believed that anything worth believing could be *proved* – whether by logical reasoning or by scientific experimentation. For example, the nineteenth-century mathematician W. K. Clifford (1845–79) argued that "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence." This "positivism" had a deep impact on western culture, and its influence still lingers. The idea of "faith in God" was ridiculed by some rationalist writers, who argued that unless God's existence could be proved, it was an utterly irrelevant notion.

Yet with the passing of time, the credibility of this position has been severely weakened. It has become increasingly clear that many of the fundamental beliefs of western culture lie beyond proof. The philosopher of science Michael Polanyi (1886–1964) argued that certain unprovable beliefs lay behind the working methods of the natural sciences. As Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809–92) pointed out in his poem *The Ancient Sage*, nothing that was actually worth believing could be proved in the way that people like Clifford demanded:

> For nothing worthy proving can be proven,
> Nor yet disproven: wherefore thou be wise,
> Cleave ever to the sunnier side of doubt,
> And cling to Faith beyond the forms of Faith.

Since then, philosophers have become much more realistic about things. Some things can indeed be proved; but some, by their very nature, lie beyond proof. God is one of these.

Can God's existence be proved?

The basic Christian attitude to proofs for the existence of God can be set out as follows.

1. The existence of God is something that reason cannot prove conclusively. Yet the fact that the existence of God lies *beyond* reason does not mean that the existence of God is *contrary* to reason.

2. Certain excellent reasons may be put forward for suggesting that God exists; these do not, however, count as "proofs" in the sense of "rigorous logical demonstrations" or "conclusive scientific experiments."
3. Faith is about trust in God, rather than just accepting that God exists.

In what follows, we shall explore this aspect of Christian theology in a little more detail, focusing on Thomas Aquinas, probably the most famous and influential theologian of the Middle Ages. Born in Italy, he achieved his fame through his teaching and writing at the University of Paris and other northern universities. His fame rests chiefly on his *Summa Theologiae*, composed towards the end of his life and not totally finished at the time of his death. However, he also wrote many other significant works, particularly the *Summa contra Gentiles*, which represents a classic statement of the rationality of the Christian faith, and especially the existence of God.

Aquinas believed that it was entirely proper to identify pointers towards the existence of God, drawn from general human experience of the world. His "Five Ways" represent five lines of argument in support of the existence of God, each of which draws on some aspect of the world which "points" to the existence of its creator.

So what kind of pointers does Aquinas have in mind? The basic line of thought guiding Aquinas is that the world mirrors God, as its creator – an idea which is given more formal expression in his doctrine of the "analogy of being." Just as an artist might sign a painting to identify it as his handiwork, so God has stamped a divine "signature" upon the creation. What we observe in the world – for example, its signs of ordering – can be explained if God was its creator. If God both brought the world into existence, and impressed the divine image and likeness upon it, then something of God's nature can be known from the creation.

So where might we look in creation to find evidence for the existence of God? Aquinas argues that the ordering of the world is the most convincing evidence of God's existence and wisdom. This basic assumption underlies each of the "Five Ways," although it is of particular importance in the case of the argument often referred to as the "argument from design" or the "teleological argument." We shall consider the first and last of these five "ways" to illustrate the issues.

The first way begins from the observation that things in the world are in motion or change. The world is not static, but is dynamic. Examples of this are easy to list. Rain falls from the sky. Stones roll down valleys. The earth revolves around the sun (a fact, incidentally, unknown to Aquinas). This, the first of Aquinas's arguments, is normally referred to as the "argument from motion"; however, it is clear that the "movement" in question is actually understood in more general terms, so that the term "change" is more appropriate as a translation of the Latin term *motus*.

So how did nature come to be in motion? Why is it changing? Why isn't it static? Aquinas argues that everything which moves is moved by something else. For every motion, there is a cause. Things don't just move; they are moved by something else. Now each cause of motion must itself have a cause. And that cause must have a cause as well. And so Aquinas argues that there is a whole series of causes of motion lying behind the world as we know it. Now unless there is an infinite number of these causes, Aquinas argues, there must be a single cause right at the origin of the series. From this original cause of motion, all other motion is ultimately derived. This is the origin of the great chain of causality which we see reflected in the way the world behaves. From the fact that things are in motion, Aquinas thus argues for the existence of a single original cause of all this motion. This, Aquinas insists, is none other than God.

In more recent times, this argument has been restated in terms of God as the one who brought the universe into existence. For this reason, it is often referred to as the "cosmological" argument (from the Greek word *kosmos*, meaning "universe"). The most commonly encountered statement of the argument runs along the following lines:

1. Everything within the universe depends on something else for its existence;
2. What is true of its individual parts is also true of the universe itself;
3. The universe thus depends on something else for its existence for as long as it has existed or will exist;
4. The universe thus depends on God for its existence.

The argument basically assumes that the existence of the universe is something that requires explanation. It will be clear that this type of

argument relates directly to modern cosmological research, particularly the "big bang" theory of the origins of the cosmos.

The fifth and final way is known as the teleological argument, which derives its name from the Greek word *telos*, meaning "purpose" or "goal." Aquinas notes that the world shows obvious traces of intelligent design. Natural processes and objects seem to be adapted with certain definite objectives in mind. They seem to have a purpose. They seem to have been designed. But things don't design themselves: they are caused and designed by someone or something else. Arguing from this observation, Aquinas concludes that the source of this natural ordering must be conceded to be God.

This argument was developed by the English popular theologian William Paley (1743–1805), best known for his work *Natural Theology* (1802). According to Paley, the world was like a watch. It showed evidence of intelligent design, and having been created for a purpose. If there was a watch, there must also be a watchmaker. Paley was particularly impressed by the construction of the human eye, which he argued to be so complex and highly developed that it could only be the result of intelligent design and construction.

Paley's argument was highly influential in nineteenth-century England. However, its plausibility was eroded by the theory of evolution proposed by Charles Darwin (1809–82), which offered an alternative explanation of how such complex structures arose. In his *Origin of Species* (1859), Darwin insisted that these could be explained on a purely natural basis, without need for an intelligent divine designer. Nevertheless, the "argument from design" remains an intriguing idea, which continues to fascinate people.

It will be obvious that Aquinas's arguments are similar in terms of their structure. Each depends on tracing a causal sequence back to its single origin, and identifying this with God. These are thus not "proofs" in the strict sense of the word, as they actually presuppose God's existence! Aquinas's approach is actually rather different. His argument is that, if we presuppose that God made the world, we end up with a way of making sense of the world that makes a lot of sense of things. In other words, Aquinas is arguing that, seen from the Christian perspective, the existence of God resonates well with what can be observed of the world. It is thus a confirmation, rather than a proof, of God's existence.

Are proofs of God's existence of any use?

But other theologians have viewed such "proofs" with skepticism. The great French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623–62) had two major concerns about the kind of approach adopted by Aquinas. First, he found it difficult to accept that the rather abstract philosophical "god" which resulted from such arguments was anything like the living God of the Old and New Testaments. In his *Pensées*, Pascal suggested that "metaphysical proofs for the existence of God are so remote from human reasoning, and so complex, that they have little impact."

But second, Pascal argued that these "proofs" assumed that God was known primarily through reason. For Pascal, the human heart also had its reasons for believing (or not believing!) in God. "We know the truth, not only through our reason, but also through our heart." The appeal of God to the human condition went far beyond any resonance between the world as we know it and the ideas of the Christian faith. It extends to include a deep-seated longing for God, which Pascal held to be of major importance in the long, unended human quest for God and final meaning.

According to Pascal, you cannot argue someone into the Kingdom of God. The existence of God is not something that can be proved. Equally, it is not something that can be *disproved*. It is easy to overlook the fact that atheism is also a faith. An atheist believes that there is no God. This belief, however, is just as difficult to prove as the Christian belief that there is indeed a God.

One of the most severe and perceptive critics of such rational proofs for God's existence is the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951). His point is simple: the so-called "proofs of God's existence" are generally provided by people who already believe in God for other reasons, but hold that it is important to provide a reasoned defense of their faith.

> A proof of God's existence ought really to be something by means of which one could convince oneself that God exists. But I think that what *believers* who have furnished such proofs have wanted to do is to give their "belief" an intellectual analysis and foundation, although they themselves would never have come to believe as a result of such proofs.

Faith is beyond reason but not contrary to reason

One of the most important recent discussions of the relation of faith and reason is found in Pope John Paul II's 1998 encyclical letter *Fides et Ratio* ("Faith and Reason"). In this letter, John Paul II (Karol Józef Wojtyla, 1920–2005) set out the classic Christian approach to the relation of faith and reason in a very accessible way.

Figure 3   John Paul II celebrates Mass in Bellahouston Park, Glasgow, during his visit to Scotland in 1982. © Bettmann/ Corbis.

The letter opens with a declaration that faith and reason can work together. "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth – in a word, to know himself – so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves." This is a rich and powerful statement, which deserves close attention. The basic idea is that human beings long to know the truth, and are constantly searching for it. "In the far reaches of the human heart there is a seed of desire and nostalgia for God."

So can reason alone lead humanity to this truth? The letter pays a handsome tribute to philosophy, as the legitimate human quest for truth. Philosophy is "one of the noblest of human tasks," which is "driven by the desire to discover the ultimate truth of existence." Yet unaided human reason cannot fully penetrate to the mystery of life. It cannot answer questions such as "why are we here?" For this reason, God graciously chose to make these things known through revelation which would otherwise remain unknown. "The truth made known to us by Revelation is neither the product nor the consummation of an argument devised by human reason."

The letter stresses that faith is not blind trust, opposed to the evidence of the world. Rather, it points out that the world – which Christians see as God's creation – is studded with hints of God's existence and nature. It appeals to Paul's sermon preached at the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17) in arguing that it is entirely reasonable to infer the existence of

God from the wonders of nature and a human sense of divinity within us. These do not count as "proofs"; they are, however, confirmation or corroboration of the basic themes of faith. In the eleventh century, Anselm of Canterbury argued that "faith seeks understanding." Having believed, we long to understand the inner dynamics and structures of our faith.

Similar lines of argument are developed by John Polkinghorne (born 1930), one of Britain's leading theoretical physicists with a strong interest in Christian theology. Throughout his many books, Polkinghorne stresses that Christianity, like the natural sciences, is concerned about making sense of the world on the basis of the evidence that is available. "Faith is not a question of shutting one's eyes, gritting one's teeth, and believing the impossible. It involves a leap, but a leap into the light rather than the dark." Faith is to be understood as "motivated belief, based on evidence." It is rigorously based on reflection on the world – on the various "clues" it offers to its origins and nature.

For example, Polkinghorne argues that science shows us a universe that is deeply intelligible, rationally beautiful, finely tuned for fruitfulness, intrinsically rational, partly veiled in character, open in its process, and information-generating in its nature. These remarkable properties, he argues, are not just happy accidents. They are something that needs to be explained. For Polkinghorne, the best explanation of these observations is that the world is the orderly creation of God. The approach is evidence-based, asking how what we observe may best be explained. It is not conclusive; it is, however, highly suggestive.

Polkinghorne also stresses the importance of the figure of Jesus of Nazareth for Christian faith. Jesus is part of the evidence that has to be assessed.

> The centre of my faith lies in my encounter with the figure of Jesus Christ, as I meet him in the Gospels, in the witness of the church and in the sacraments. Here is the heart of my Christian faith and hope. Yet, at a subsidiary but supportive level, there are also hints of God's presence which arise from our scientific knowledge. The actual way we answer the question "How?", turns out to point us to pressing also the question "Why?", so that science by itself is found not to be sufficiently intellectually satisfying.

Although some atheist writers persist in portraying Christian faith as a blind leap in the dark, it is clear that this is not the case. Faith, as

Thomas Aquinas points out, has its reasons. Faith is to be understood as motivated belief, based on evidence – a leap into the light, rather than into the dark.

Up to this point, we have considered faith primarily in terms of intellectual assent – as, for example, in Thomas Aquinas's view of faith as "assent to divine revelation." Yet there is more to the idea than this. During the sixteenth century, particular emphasis came to be placed on the relational aspects of faith. To "believe in God" is about more than accepting that God exists; it is about *trusting* this God. In what follows, we shall consider this important aspect of faith.

Faith and God's promises

Martin Luther is one of a number of theologians who stressed that faith, as the Christian church understands the term, is far more than intellectual assent. Certainly, faith believes that certain things are true. There is unquestionably an element of understanding to faith. But there is more to it than that. For Luther, faith is fundamentally trust. He often uses the Latin word *fiducia*, which could be translated as "confidence," to denote the aspect of faith he wants to emphasize. Faith is about trusting a God who makes promises, and whose promises may be relied upon. In his major 1520 essay *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther stressed this aspect of faith.

> Where there is the Word of the God who makes promises, there must necessarily be the faith of the person who accepts those promises. It is clear that the beginning of our salvation is a faith which clings to the Word of a promising God who, without any effort on our part, in free and unmerited mercy goes before us and offers us a word of promise.

Three points relating to Luther's idea of faith may be singled out for discussion:

1. Faith has a personal, rather than a purely historical, reference.
2. Faith concerns trust in the promises of God.
3. Faith unites the believer to Christ.

We shall consider each of these points individually.

First, faith is not simply historical knowledge. Luther argues that a faith which is content to believe in the historical reliability of the gospels is not a faith which changes our relationship with God. Sinners are perfectly capable of trusting in the historical details of the gospels; but these facts of themselves are not adequate for true Christian faith. Saving faith has to do primarily with believing and trusting that Christ was born for us personally, and has accomplished for us the work of salvation.

The second point concerns faith as "trust" (Latin: *fiducia*). This notion of faith is prominent in the sixteenth-century conception of faith, and occurs frequently in the writings of both Luther and Calvin. Luther uses a nautical analogy to bring out the importance of trust and commitment in the life of faith. "Everything depends upon faith. The person who does not have faith is like someone who has to cross the sea, but is so frightened that he does not trust the ship. And so he stays where he is, and is never saved, because he will not get on board and cross over." Faith is not merely believing that something is true; it is being prepared to act upon that belief, and rely upon it. To use Luther's analogy: faith is not simply about believing that a ship exists; it is about stepping into it, and entrusting ourselves to it.

But what are we being asked to trust? Are we being asked simply to have faith in faith? The question could perhaps be phrased more accurately: who are we being asked to trust? For Luther, the answer was unequivocal: faith is about being prepared to put one's trust in the promises of God, and the integrity and faithfulness of the God who made those promises. Believers "must be certain that the one who has promised forgiveness to whoever confesses their sins will most faithfully fulfill this promise." For Luther, faith is only as strong as the one in whom we believe and trust. The efficacy of faith does not rest upon the intensity with which we believe, but in the reliability of the one in whom we believe. It is not the greatness of our faith, but the greatness of God, which counts.

The foundation of one's faith thus matters far more than its intensity. It is pointless to trust passionately in someone who is not worthy of trust; even a weak faith in someone who is totally reliable is vastly to be preferred to a strong faith in a scoundrel or trickster. Trust is not, however, an occasional attitude. For Luther, it is an undeviating trusting

outlook upon life, a constant stance of conviction in the trustworthiness of the promises of God. As Karl Barth put this in the twentieth century: "In God alone is there faithfulness, and faith is the trust that we may hold to Him, to His promise and to His guidance. To hold to God is to rely on the fact that God is there for me, and to live in this certainty."

In the third place, faith unites the believer with Christ. Luther states this principle clearly in his 1520 writing, *The Liberty of a Christian*:

> Faith unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. As Paul teaches us, Christ and the soul become one flesh by this mystery (Ephesians 5:31–2). And if they are one flesh, and if the marriage is for real – indeed, it is the most perfect of all marriages, and human marriages are poor examples of this one true marriage – then it follows that everything that they have is held in common, whether good or evil. So the believer can boast of and glory in whatever Christ possesses, as though it were his or her own; and whatever the believer has, Christ claims as his own. Let us see how this works out, and see how it benefits us. Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation. The human soul is full of sin, death, and damnation. Now let faith come between them. Sin, death, and damnation will be Christ's. And grace, life, and salvation will be the believer's.

Faith, then, is not assent to an abstract set of doctrines – perhaps a possible weakness of Aquinas's approach. Rather, it is a "wedding ring" (Luther), pointing to mutual commitment and union between Christ and the believer. It is the response of the whole person of the believer to God, which leads in turn to the real and personal presence of Christ in the believer.

"To know Christ is to know his benefits," wrote Philip Melanchthon (1497–1560), Luther's colleague at Wittenberg. Faith makes both Christ and his benefits – such as forgiveness, justification, and hope – available to the believer. Calvin makes this point with characteristic clarity. "Having ingrafted us into his body, [Christ] makes us partakers, not only of all his benefits, but also of himself." Christ, Calvin insists, is not "received merely in the understanding and imagination. For the promises offer him, not so that we end up with the mere

sight and knowledge of him, but that we enjoy a true communication of him."

Faith and doubt: the problem of suffering

Faith can never fully prove its claims. This is not, however, a problem that is unique to Christianity. Any belief-system finds itself in the same position – including, incidentally, atheism. Belief in God can neither be proved nor disproved with total certainty. In this section, we shall explore one area of theology which confronts a difficulty that many Christians encounter. If God is good, why is there suffering and pain in the world? How can the presence of evil or suffering be reconciled with the Christian affirmation of the goodness of the God who created the world? In what follows, we shall explore some of the ways in which this has been explored within the Christian tradition.

The approach developed by the second-century writer Irenaeus of Lyons has been particularly influential. For Irenaeus, human nature is a potentiality – something that emerges. Humans are created with certain capacities for growth toward maturity. That capacity for spiritual maturing cannot develop in an abstract situation. It needs to be in contact with and have experience of good and evil, if truly informed decisions are to be made. This tradition tends to view the world as a "vale of soul-making" (to use a term taken from the English poet John Keats, 1795–1821), in which encounter with evil is seen as a necessary prerequisite for spiritual growth and development.

In the modern period, this approach was developed by the philosopher John Hick (1922–2012) in his *Evil and the God of Love* (1966). Hick here emphasized that human beings are created incomplete. In order for them to become what God intends them to be, they must participate in the world. God did not create human beings as automatons, but as individuals who are capable of responding freely to God. Unless a real choice is available between good and evil, the biblical injunctions to "choose good" are meaningless. Good and evil are thus necessary presences within the world, in order that informed and meaningful human development may take place.

A quite different approach is found in the writings of the American philosopher Alvin Plantinga (born 1932), who offers a "free will defense" that is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition. Plantinga's approach picks up on some themes developed by Augustine of Hippo, especially his argument that evil arises from an abuse of human free will. Plantinga's basic approach can be summarized as follows:

1. Free will is morally important. That means that a world in which human beings possess free will is superior to a hypothetical world in which they do not.
2. If human beings were forced to do nothing but good, that would represent a denial of human free will.
3. God must bring into being the best possible world that he is able to do.
4. It must therefore follow that God must create a world with free will.
5. This means that God is not responsible if human beings choose to do evil. God is operating under self-imposed constraints that mean he will not compel human beings to do good.

Hick and Plantinga both offer philosophical solutions to the problem of evil. Others have tried to adopt a more rigorously theological approach, based on the specific ideas of the Christian faith. One of the most influential of these has been the argument that God suffers – in other words, that God shares in the sufferings of the world. In *The Crucified God* (1974), Jürgen Moltmann (born 1926) argued that the suffering of Christ on the cross is both the foundation and the criterion of an authentically *Christian* theology. Precisely because Jesus is God incarnate (an idea we shall explore later in this work), the suffering of Christ is also the suffering of *God*.

Moltmann argues that a God who cannot suffer is a *deficient*, not a perfect, God. Stressing that God cannot be *forced* to change or undergo suffering, Moltmann declares that God willed to undergo suffering. The suffering of God is the direct consequence of the divine *decision* to suffer, and the divine *willingness* to suffer. "In the passion of the Son, the Father himself suffers the pains of abandonment. In the death of the Son, death comes upon God himself, and the Father suffers the death of his Son in his love for forsaken man."

Moltmann's approach has opened up a new way of thinking about the problem of suffering. Traditionally, one of the major concerns here has been the feeling that God is somehow immune from the sufferings of the world, standing over and above it as a detached, uninvolved spectator. How, many asked, could anyone believe in such a God, who, having created the world, then abandons it to pain and suffering? Annie Besant's influential book *Why I Do Not Believe in God* (1887) expresses this concern particularly well: "I do not believe in God. My mind finds no grounds on which to build up a reasonable faith. My heart revolts against the spectre of an Almighty Indiffer-

Figure 4 Jürgen Moltmann (born 1926). Courtesy of the Episcopal Church.

ence to the pain of sentient beings." Moltmann's response is that God chooses to share the suffering of that world. Far from being "indifferent," he shows his commitment and compassion by entering into this vale of soul-making, bearing its sorrow and pain.

Does this approach help reduce the intellectual difficulties created for faith by the existence of suffering? It is a moot point. Yet it points to another aspect of the issue, which is of no small importance to an understanding of the nature of faith. One can address the problem of suffering in two quite different ways. One tries to make sense of it; the other tries to help people cope with it – to live meaningfully and courageously in the face of suffering and pain.

This is seen well in the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–44). For Bonhoeffer, "our God is a suffering God" – one who bears our sin, pain, and anguish. The deepest meaning of the cross of Christ is that there is no suffering on earth that is not also borne by God. The church, for Bonhoeffer, is the continuing presence of the suffering Christ in history, a body of persons called to share in the messianic suffering of God by being there for others, carrying their burdens and thus fulfilling the duty laid on them by Christ himself. It is through suffering that Christians learn to turn the final outcome of their actions over to God, who alone can perfect them in glory. And it is in dying that they find true freedom as they meet God face to face. A suffering God, according

to Bonhoeffer, has not abandoned his people. Far from it; he stands by them as a fellow-sufferer, and will bring them home to a place from which suffering and pain have been removed.

The twentieth century witnessed much ink being spilled over the question of what the existence of suffering has to say about the existence of God. The results have been inconclusive, not least because there has been a growing realization that the debate is going precisely nowhere. As philosopher William Alston (1921–2009) pointed out, any *logical* argument which attempts to show that evil is logically incompatible with the existence of God "is now acknowledged on (almost) all sides" to be completely bankrupt. Yet it remains an important debate, even if its final resolution may be indefinitely postponed!

Engaging with a text

In this opening chapter, we have explored some aspects of faith. We have seen how faith can be understood in a number of ways. To believe in God is both about accepting that a God exists, and also that this God can be known and trusted. We have already looked at some ideas in the writings of Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther to illustrate these points. Now we are going to try to take things further, and interact with a theological text.

Why is this so important? Because at some point, you are going to need to begin reading works of theology for yourself. It is therefore important to begin interacting with these in a manageable way as soon as possible. Some chapters of this book have a section which will help you to engage with a short extract from a leading theologian or theological document. These will be drawn from a variety of Christian traditions, offering you experience of a number of different approaches. You will be guided through this process. To begin with, the texts will be short – but gradually, they will become longer. Initially, you will be given a lot of help – but as you gain in confidence, there will be less need for this assistance. We are going to begin this process of engagement with a short but fascinating extract from a leading Protestant writer on the theme of "faith."

The text in question is John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which was first published in 1536 and went through many editions

until the final, definitive edition of 1559. Calvin is a very precise and logical theologian, who is generally very easy to read and understand. In what follows, we are going to interact with the definition of faith which he sets out in this major work. Here is the definition:

> Now we shall have a right definition of faith if we say that it is a steady and certain knowledge of the divine benevolence towards us, which is founded upon the truth of the gracious promise of God in Christ, and is both revealed to our minds and sealed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

Take a few moments to read this through, and take in what Calvin is saying. Then use these questions as a way of engaging with his ideas.

1. Note how Calvin's definition of faith is *trinitarian*. We shall be exploring this aspect of the Christian faith in more detail later (chapter 7). For the moment, note how Calvin correlates different aspects of faith with each of the three persons of the Trinity – Father, Son, and Spirit. Try to identify each of these aspects. If you are studying this book in a discussion group, spend some time talking about this, making sure that you are happy about the threefold structure of this definition.

2. The first part of this definition declares that faith is a "steady and certain knowledge of the divine benevolence towards us." Notice first how Calvin uses language that expresses confidence in God, and stresses God's reliability. Notice also how faith is defined as "knowledge" – but a certain very specific kind of knowledge. It is not just "knowledge"; in fact, it is not even "knowledge of God." It is specifically "knowledge of *God's benevolence towards us*." Calvin's language is very specific and intentional. Faith is grounded and based in God's *goodness*. It is not simply about accepting that God exists, but about encountering God's kindness to us. Do you agree with Calvin at this point?

3. The definition now goes on to declare that faith is "founded upon the truth of the gracious promise of God in Christ." Once more, notice how faith is again affirmed to be about knowledge – the use of the word "truth" is very important here. Calvin wants

to make it absolutely clear that faith is not a human invention or delusion, but something that is grounded in the bedrock of truth. But notice how Calvin then proceeds to link this with a "gracious promise of God." For Calvin, we are dealing with a God who *makes promises* to us – promises which can be trusted and relied upon. You might like to compare this idea with Luther's views on the matter, which we considered earlier in this chapter, and notice their similarity at this point. It is important to see how Calvin identifies Christ as the confirmation or means of disclosure of these promises. You might like to look up 2 Corinthians 1:20, and see how Calvin's approach relates to that text.

4. Calvin clearly holds that faith involves both mind and heart. If you are in a discussion group, you might like to explore how he approaches each of these. Note how, once more, Calvin affirms that faith is indeed about knowledge – something that affects the way in which we think, affecting our minds. Yet it is more than this: it is something that transforms us internally. Notice how Calvin's language about the "heart" points to a deeper change within us than just mental acceptance of an idea. Calvin sees God as active throughout the process of coming to faith. Faith is not human insight; it is personal knowledge of God made possible by the Holy Spirit.

Having explored the meaning of the term "faith," we may now turn to explore the content of faith – beginning with what it means to believe in God.

CHAPTER 2

God

The Christian creeds open by speaking of faith in "God, the Father Almighty." The reality of God lies at the heart of Christian theology. That little word "God" opens up many important questions. For example, how does belief in "God, the Father Almighty" relate to belief in God as Trinity – a matter to which we shall return in chapter 7? Let's begin our reflections by asking this question: which God are we talking about?

Many of the most fundamental theological questions have to do with how the rich Christian understanding and experience of God can be represented and described in words and images. The word "god" is not good enough in itself to identify the God who stands at the heart of the Christian faith. It is important to remember that Israel's reflections on the identity of its God – which Israel named using phrases such as "the Lord God of Israel" – took place against a background of polytheism (that is, belief in many gods).

Each nation in the ancient Near East had its own god; some recognized many different gods, each with its own special name, distinctive function, or sphere of influence. The Old Testament refers to some of these gods by name – such as "Baal," the Canaanite fertility god. Simply talking about "God" was thus not particularly informative. It begged the obvious (and perfectly legitimate) question: which of these gods do you mean? Part of the task of Christian theology is to identify the God in which Christians believe.

This process identifying and distinguishing this God can be seen in both the Old and New Testaments. For the Old Testament prophets, Israel knew and worshipped the God who had delivered them from exile in Egypt, and led them into the promised land of Canaan. In the New Testament, we find this idea picked up and developed further. Christians believe in the same God as the great Old Testament figures of faith – such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses; this God is, however, finally and fully disclosed in Jesus Christ. Thus Paul speaks of "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 1:3).

This issue of clarifying what was distinct about the Christian god remained important during the patristic age, particularly within the Greek culture of the eastern Mediterranean area. The great Egyptian city of Alexandria, for example, was home to a wide variety of religions with an astonishingly diverse range of understandings of what the word "god" meant. Some clarification was clearly needed, if the God worshipped by Christians was not to be confused with its pagan alternatives, or with philosophical notions of God held by the various schools of Greek philosophy.

The basic idea we find throughout the New Testament is that Christians worship and know the same God as Israel. Nevertheless, Christians hold that this God is revealed supremely and finally in and through Jesus Christ. Thus the Letter to the Hebrews opens by declaring that the same God who spoke to Israel "in many times and in various ways" through the prophets has now "spoken to us through a Son," who is to be recognized as the "exact representation" of God (Hebrews 1:1–3). This point demonstrates how the Christian understanding of God is linked with the person of Christ. To know Christ is to know God. Or, as an early second-century Christian writer put it, "we must learn to think of Jesus as of God" (1 Clement 1:1). It is an excellent example of the interconnectedness of core Christian beliefs.

So what do Christians believe about this God? The opening words of the Apostles' Creed get us off to a good start: Christians believe in a God who is "the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth." We shall turn to explore the very rich and powerful theme of creation in the following chapter. To begin with, we shall look at the idea of God as "Father" and "Almighty." Yet before we begin to explore what it means to talk about God as "father," it will be helpful to look at the general question of the use of analogies in theology.

Analogies in theology

One of the most noticeable things about the way in which the Christian Bible refers to God is its extensive use of imagery. God is depicted as a shepherd, a king, a rock – and a father.

The Bible uses many analogies to speak about God. To explore some of the issues that arise from using analogies in theology, we may turn to consider one of the most familiar biblical verses: Psalm 23:1, "The Lord is my shepherd." This image of God as a shepherd is encountered frequently in the Old Testament (e.g., Psalm 80:1; Isaiah 40:11; Ezekiel 34:12), and is taken up in the New Testament to refer to Jesus, who is the "good shepherd" (John 10:11). But what does this analogy tell us about God? How can we develop this image theologically? The easiest way of answering this question is to wrestle with the image and see what happens. What ideas come to mind when we talk of a "shepherd"? For most people, four ideas come to mind, as follows.

First, there is the idea of the loving care of the shepherd for the sheep. The shepherd was committed to his flock of sheep on a full-time basis. Indeed, the shepherd tended to be regarded as a social outcast in Israel, precisely on account of the enormous amount of time he was obliged to spend with his flock, which prevented him from taking part in normal social activities. To speak of God as a shepherd thus conveys the idea of the total commitment of God to Israel and the church. The idea is developed very powerfully in the New Testament, especially in the parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:3–7). Here the shepherd actively seeks out the lost sheep, in order to bring it home. The final intensification of the image is found in John's gospel, where it is emphasized that the good shepherd – who is immediately identified as Jesus – will willingly go so far as to lay down his life for the safety of his sheep (John 10:11–16).

Second, thinking of God as a shepherd affirms God's guidance. The shepherd knows where food and water are to be found, and guides the sheep to them. To liken God to a shepherd is to emphasize God's constant presence with Israel and the church. It is to affirm God's ability to protect from the dangers which life offers and to bring people to a place of plenty and safety. God "tends his flock like a shepherd. He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young" (Isaiah 40:11).

Third, the image of God as shepherd tells us something about ourselves, from a Christian perspective. We are the sheep of God's pasture (Psalm 79:13; 95:7; 100:3). We are like sheep, incapable of looking after ourselves, and continually going astray. We are not self-sufficient: just as the sheep rely upon the shepherd for their existence, so we have to learn to rely upon God. We may like to think that we are capable of looking after ourselves, but a Christian understanding of human nature demands that we recognize our total dependence upon God. Thus human sinfulness is often compared with running away from God, like a stray sheep. "We all, like sheep, have gone astray; each of us has turned to his own way" (Isaiah 53:6; cf. Psalm 119:176; 1 Peter 2:25).

And just as the shepherd goes to look for his lost sheep, so God came to find us in our lostness and bring us home. The parallels with the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32) will be obvious. In that gospel chapter, we find three stories of "lostness" being turned to "being found" and "rejoicing." The shepherd finds his lost sheep (Luke 15:3–8); the woman finds her lost coin (Luke 15:8–10); the father finds his lost son (Luke 15:11–32). And in all these analogies we find the same constant emphasis of the Christian faith: that we are lost, and that God has come into the world in Jesus Christ in order to find us and bring us home.

To speak of "God as a shepherd" means that "God is *like* a shepherd." In other words, the image of a shepherd helps us think about the nature of God, and allows us to gain insights into his nature. It does not mean that God is *identical* to a human shepherd. Rather, it means that some aspects of a human shepherd help us think about God more effectively.

But is *every* aspect of the human analogy valid in thinking about God? Every analogy breaks down at some point. How far can we press this analogy before it ceases to be reliable? To explore this issue, we could draw up a brief list of things that are true about shepherds.

1. Shepherds look after sheep.
2. Shepherds protect their sheep against danger.
3. Shepherds lead their sheep to food and water.
4. Shepherds are human beings.

It is immediately clear that the first three aspects of the analogy can be incorporated into our thinking about God. God cares, protects, and

leads. In all these respects, the analogy of the shepherd works well, and illuminates the character of God.

Yet shepherds are ultimately human beings. Is *this* aspect of the analogy also to be incorporated into our idea of God? It is quite clear we are not meant to think of God as a human being. While God is *not* a human being, it is still true that the behavior of one particular group of human beings is seen as helping us to get a better understanding of the nature of God. So it would seem that this is one aspect of the analogy which we are not meant to press too far.

Now these are very simple points to make, and you might feel that they are out of place in any serious discussion of Christian theology. In fact, this is far from the case. What we have been doing is exploring the important theological issue of how far an analogy of God is to be pressed, and how these analogies can offer powerful visual stimulus to theological reflection. It also raises the question of why we should use images of God in this way. Why not use more conceptual or abstract ways of speaking or thinking about God? The answer within the Christian theological tradition could be summarized as follows.

There is no way in which a created human mind would be capable of beholding God directly. As a result, we need to think of God in a scaled-down manner, appropriate to our ability to cope. Some early Christian writers used to compare understanding God with looking directly into the sun. The human eye is simply not capable of withstanding the full brilliance of the sun. In the same way, the human mind cannot cope with the full glory of God.

This point is made in the story of the conversation between the Roman emperor Hadrian and the Jewish rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah in the early second century. The emperor asked to be allowed to see Joshua's god. The rabbi replied that this was impossible, an answer which failed to satisfy the emperor. So the rabbi took the emperor outside, and asked him to stare at the midday summer sun. "Impossible!" replied the emperor. "If you cannot look at the sun, which God created," replied the rabbi, "how much less can you behold the glory of God himself!"

Even though the human eye cannot cope with the full brightness of the sun, however, it is nevertheless possible to look at the sun through a piece of dark glass. This greatly reduces the brilliance of the sun, so

that the human eye can cope with it. Otherwise, looking at the sun would be completely beyond its capacities. In much the same way, it is helpful to think of the scriptural models or pictures of God as revealing God in manageable proportions, so that the human mind can cope with him.

John Calvin argued that God knows our limited ability to cope with ideas, and thus reveals himself in ways that we can handle. According to Calvin, God's revelation is adapted or "accommodated" to our capacity for reflection. Calvin insists that God simply cannot be comprehended by the human mind. What is known of God is known by revelation; and that revelation is adapted to our capacity as finite, fallen human creatures. This does not reflect any weakness or inadequacy on God's part. It is simply a reflection of God's generous and kindly nature, by which God takes our weakness into account. Calvin comments that "God accommodates himself to our ability" – meaning that God uses words, ideas, and images that we can relate to.

So having explored the general issue of the use of analogies in theology, we may now turn to consider one specific analogy that we encounter in the creed – the analogy of God as a *father*.

God as father

The image of God as father is deeply embedded within the Christian faith, not least because of the prayer that Jesus Christ taught his disciples, now known as the "Lord's Prayer," which opens with the words "Our Father." If Jesus Christ addresses God in this way, it is clearly of major importance to the Christian faith. But how are we to interpret this image? You might like to spend a few moments jotting down some of the ideas that the image conveys, much as we did earlier in the case of the shepherd analogy.

The following ideas might come to mind, and we shall explore each of them briefly.

1. Fathers are human beings.
2. Fathers bring their children into existence.
3. Fathers care for their children.
4. Fathers are male.

The first of these characteristics is clearly not meant to be transferred to our thinking about God. As we saw in the case of the shepherd analogy, this is the inevitable consequence of using language drawn from the created order to refer to the creator.

The second is clearly important. God is our *originator*, the one who brought us into existence. Without God, we would not be here. Yet this divine act of origination is clearly understood to be personal, not abstract – a point to which we shall return in chapter 3, when thinking about God as creator.

Thirdly, the analogy of God as father conveys the idea of divine care for humanity. As Jesus Christ pointed out in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:9–11), even human fathers want to give their children good things. So how much more will God, as our heavenly father, want to give good things to those who ask for them in prayer. The Old Testament also often compares God's relationship with Israel to a father's complex relationship with his son. The prophet Hosea uses this illustration to bring out how Israel has become a virtual stranger to God:

> When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more I called Israel, the further they went away from me. They sacrificed to the Baals, and they burned incense to images. It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms, but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with the cords of human kindness, with ties of love. (Hosea 11:1–4)

It is the fourth aspect of this analogy which has generated most debate, and which needs further discussion. Both Old and New Testaments use male language about God. The Greek word for "god" (*theos*) is unquestionably masculine, and most of the analogies used for God throughout scripture – such as father, king, and shepherd – are also male. Does this mean that God *is* male?

It is important to note here that the Bible also uses female imagery to refer to the love of God for humanity – for example, the natural love of a mother for her children (Isaiah 49:15). Psalm 51:1 refers to God's "great compassion." It is interesting to note that the Hebrew word for "compassion" (*rachmin*) is derived from the word for "womb" (*rechmen*). God's compassion towards his people is that of a mother towards her child (cf. Isaiah 66:12–13).

So is God male? Does speaking of God as "father" mean that Christianity believes in a male deity? Earlier, we noted the analogical nature of theological language. Individual persons or social roles, largely drawn from the rural world of the ancient Near East, are identified as models for the divine activity or personality. One such analogy is that of a shepherd; another is that of a father. Yet the statement that "a father in ancient Israelite society is a suitable analogy for God" is not equivalent to saying that "God is male." To speak of God as father is to say that the role of the father in ancient Israel allows us insights into the nature of God. It is not to say that God *is* a male human being. Yet the Old Testament is clear that mothers were also analogies for aspects of God's love for Israel. Although there are many more references to paternal role models than to maternal, there is no doubt that both fathers and mothers function as analogies for God in the Bible.

God is the creator of males and females; yet God is neither male nor female. The important point to appreciate here is that *neither* male nor female sexuality is to be attributed to God. Sexuality or gender are attributes of the created order, which cannot be assumed to correspond directly to any such polarity within God as creator. Indeed, the Old Testament completely avoids attributing sexual functions to God, on account of the strongly pagan overtones of such associations. The Canaanite fertility cults emphasized the sexual functions of both gods and goddesses; the Old Testament refuses to endorse the idea that the gender or the sexuality of God is a significant matter.

The German Lutheran theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928–2014) develops this point in his *Systematic Theology* (1990):

> The aspect of fatherly care in particular is taken over in what the Old Testament has to say about God's fatherly care for Israel. The sexual definition of the father's role plays no part … To bring sexual differentiation into the understanding of God would mean polytheism; it was thus ruled out for the God of Israel … The fact that God's care for Israel can also be expressed in terms of a mother's love shows clearly enough how little there is any sense of sexual distinction in the understanding of God as Father.

In an attempt to bring out the fact that God is not male, a number of recent writers have explored the idea of God as "mother" (which

brings out the female aspects of God), or as "friend" (which brings out the more relational and gender-neutral aspects of God). An excellent example of this is provided by the American theologian Sallie McFague (born 1933), in her *Models of God*. Recognizing that speaking of "God as father" does not mean that God is male, she writes:

> God as mother does not mean that God is mother (or father). We imagine God as both mother and father, but we realize how inadequate these and any other metaphors are to express the creative love of God … Nevertheless, we speak of this love in language that is familiar and dear to us, the language of mothers and fathers who give us life, from whose bodies we come, and upon whose care we depend.

The new interest in the issues raised by the maleness of most of the biblical images of God has led to a careful reading of the spiritual literature of early periods in Christian history, resulting in an increased appreciation of the use of female imagery during these times. An excellent example of this is provided by the *Revelations of Divine Love*, an account of sixteen visions which appeared to the English writer Julian of Norwich (1342–ca. 1416) in May 1373. The visions are notable for their distinctive tendency to refer to both God and Jesus Christ in strongly maternal terms.

> I saw that God rejoices to be our Father, and also that he rejoices to be our Mother; and yet again, that he rejoices to be our true Husband, with our soul as his beloved bride … He is the foundation, substance and the thing itself, what it is by nature. He is the true Father and Mother of what things are by nature.

Talking about God as "shepherd" or "father" leads us on to another important theme of Christian thinking about God – namely, the concept of a *personal* God, to which we now turn.

Figure 5 Julian of Norwich, statue by David Holgate at Norwich Cathedral. © Jason Bye/Alamy.

A personal God

Down the ages, theologians and ordinary Christian believers alike have had no hesitation in speaking about God in personal terms. For example, Christianity has ascribed to God a whole series of attributes, such as love, trustworthiness, and purpose, which are generally thought to have strongly personal associations. Many writers have pointed out that the Christian practice of prayer seems to be modeled on the relationship between a child and a parent. Prayer expresses a gracious relationship of personal trust in God. Similarly, one of Paul's leading soteriological images – reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:19) – is clearly modeled on human personal relationships. It implies that the transformation through faith of the relationship between God and sinful human beings is like the reconciliation of two persons, such as an alienated husband and wife.

For early Christian writers, the word "person" is an expression of the individuality of a human being, as seen in his or her words and actions. Above all, there is an emphasis upon the idea of social relationships. A person is someone who plays a role in a social drama, who relates to others. A person has a part to play within a network of social relationships. "Individuality" does not imply social relationships, whereas "personality" relates to the part played by an individual in a web of relationships, by which that person is perceived to be distinctive by others. The basic idea expressed by the idea of "a personal God" is thus a God with whom we can exist in a relationship which is analogous to that which we could have with another human person.

It is helpful to consider what overtones the phrase "an impersonal God" would convey. The phrase suggests a God who is distant or aloof, who deals with humanity (if God deals with us at all) in general terms which take no account of human individuality. The idea of a personal relationship, such as love, suggests a reciprocal character to God's dealings with us. This idea is incorporated into the notion of a personal God, but not into impersonal conceptions of the nature of God. There are strongly negative overtones to the idea of "impersonal," which have passed into Christian thinking about the nature of God.

Examples of impersonal concepts of God are easily provided. Aristotle's "unmoved mover" is best seen as a cosmic force, rather than a person. The English philosopher of religion C. C. J. Webb

(1865–1954) pointed out the limitations of Aristotle's notion of God, noting how it meant that God could enter into a relationship with people:

> Aristotle does not and could not speak of a love of God for us in any sense. God, according to the principles of Aristotle's theology, can know and love nothing less than himself. … He is utterly transcendent, and beyond the reach of personal communion.

Yet perhaps the best example of such a way of thinking about God is found in the writings of the Dutch Jewish philosopher Benedict (or Baruch) Spinoza (1632–77). For Spinoza, God is "without passions, nor is he affected with any experience of joy or sadness." God is a perfect being, whose perfection would be compromise by any entanglements with the world or people. As a result, "God is affected with no emotion of joy or sadness, and consequently loves no one."

It is also important to appreciate that personal relationships establish the framework within which such key biblical themes as "love," "trust," and "faithfulness" have their meaning. Both the Old and New Testaments are full of statements concerning the "love of God," the "trustworthiness of God," and the "faithfulness of God." "Love" is a word which is used primarily of personal relationships. Furthermore, the great biblical theme of promise and fulfillment is ultimately based upon a personal relationship, in that God promises certain quite definite things (such as eternal life and forgiveness) to certain individuals. One of the great themes which dominates the Old Testament in particular is that of the covenant between God and people, by which they mutually bind themselves to each other. "I will be their God, and they will be my people" (Jeremiah 31:33). The basic idea underlying this is that of personal commitment of God to God's people, and of God's people to their God.

Figure 6 Martin Buber (1878–1965). David Rubinger/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images.

A twentieth-century philosophical analysis of what it means to speak of a "person" is also helpful in clarifying what it means to speak of a personal God. In his major work *I and Thou*

(1927), the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1878–1965) drew a fundamental distinction between two categories of relations: *I–Thou* relations, which are "personal," and *I–It* relations, which are impersonal.

1. *I–It relations.* Buber uses this category to refer to the relation between subjects and objects; for example, between a human being and a pencil. The human being is active, whereas the pencil is passive. This distinction is often referred to in more philosophical language as a *subject–object relation*, in which an active subject (in this case, the human being) relates to an inactive object (in this case, the pencil). According to Buber, the subject acts as an *I*, and the object as an *It*. The relation between the human being and pencil could thus be described as an *I–It* relation.

2. *I–Thou relations.* At this point, we come to the heart of Buber's philosophy. An I–Thou relation exists between two active subjects, between two *persons*. It is something which is *mutual* and *reciprocal*. "The I of the primary word I–Thou makes its appearance as a person, and becomes conscious of itself." In other words, Buber is suggesting that human personal relationships exemplify the essential features of an I–You relation. It is the relationship itself, that intangible and invisible bond which links two persons, which is the heart of Buber's idea of an I–Thou relation.

What, then, are the theological implications of this approach to personhood? How does Buber's philosophy help us to understand and explore the idea of God as a person? A number of key ideas emerge, all of which have important and helpful theological applications. Furthermore, Buber anticipated some of these himself. In the final sections of *I and Thou* he explores the implications of his approach to thinking and speaking about God – or, to use his preferred term, "the Absolute Thou."

1. Buber's approach means that God cannot be reduced to a concept, or to some neat conceptual formulation. According to Buber, only an "It" can be treated in this way. For Buber, God is the "Thou who can, by its nature, never become an It. That is, God is a being who escapes all attempts at objectification and transcends all description." Theology must learn to acknowledge and wrestle with the presence of God, realizing that this presence cannot be reduced to a neat package of contents.

2. Buber's approach allows valuable insights into the idea of revelation. For Christian theology, God's revelation is not simply a making known of facts about God, but a *self-revelation* of God. Revelation of information about God is to be supplemented by revelation of God as a person – a presence as much as a content. We could make sense of this by saying that revelation includes knowledge of God as both an "It" and a "Thou." We come to know things about God; yet we also come to know God. "Knowledge of God" thus includes knowledge of God as both "It" and "Thou." "Knowing God" is not simply a collection of data about God, but a personal relationship.

3. Buber's "dialogical personalism" also allows Christian theology to steer clear of the discredited idea of God as an object, perhaps the weakest and most heavily criticized aspect of some nineteenth-century liberal Protestant theology. The characteristic non-inclusive nineteenth-century phrase "man's quest for God" summed up the basic premise of this approach: God is an "It," a passive object, waiting to be discovered by (male) theologians, who are viewed as active subjects. In his 1938 work *Truth as Encounter*, Emil Brunner (1889–1966) argued that God had to be viewed as a "Thou," an active subject. As such, God could take the initiative away from humans, through self-revelation and a willingness to be known in a historical and personal form – namely, Jesus Christ. Theology would thus become the human response to God's self-disclosure, rather than the human quest for God.

The idea of God as a person is, however, of importance in other areas of theology. In addition to helping us think about the idea of revelation, it is also illuminating as we consider the idea of salvation. Paul talks about God "reconciling" us to himself through Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18–19). This idea of "reconciliation" is one of a number of ideas used in the New Testament to represent the consequences of the death of Christ on the cross. What is particularly interesting is that in this passage Paul uses exactly the same Greek word to refer to the restoration of the relationship between God and humanity that he had used earlier to refer to the restoration of the relationship between a man and his wife who had fallen out with each other (1 Corinthians 7:10–11). Paul's language suggests that Christ is mediator or go-between, restoring the relationship between God and humanity to what it once

was. A notion taken from the world of personal relationships thus helps clarify the nature of salvation, and the difference that the death and resurrection of Christ makes to things.

So if God is a person, how does this relate to the Trinitarian idea that God is three persons? We shall return to consider this question in chapter 7. For the moment, we need to note that the word "person" is being used in a different sense in each context.

God as almighty

The Creed, however, goes on to speak of God as "almighty." So what do we mean when we say that God is "almighty"? At first sight, the everyday meaning of the word "almighty" seems perfectly obvious. It means "all-powerful," and thus "capable of doing anything." Since God is almighty, it necessarily follows that God can do anything. This would appear to bring discussion of the matter to an end. What more is there to say?

Yet one of the tasks of theology is to encourage us to use language critically – to make us think about what we really mean when we talk about God. Is it really quite as simple as this? Might not the word "almighty" have a subtle difference when applied to God than when applied to a human? To explore this, let's consider this statement: "To say that God is almighty means that God can do anything."

If you are part of a study group, you might like to discuss this statement. If you are working on your own, pause at this point, and think about it. Is it right? What issues does it raise? At first, it seems fairly straightforward. Yet it runs into some difficulties at an early stage. Consider the following question: "Can God draw a triangle with four sides?" It does not take much thought to see that this question has to be answered in the negative. Triangles have three sides; to draw something with four sides is to draw a quadrilateral, not a triangle.

Now we may turn to another question. "Can God create a stone which is too heavy for God to lift?" This question involves a nice logical puzzle. If God cannot create such a stone, there is something that God cannot do. Yet if God can create such a stone, then God will not be

able to lift it – and so there is something else God cannot do. Whatever way the question is answered, God's ability to do anything is called into question. In other words, God's omnipotence is called into question in each situation.

However, on further reflection, it is not clear that these questions cause problems for the Christian understanding of God. Four-sided triangles do not and cannot exist. The fact that God cannot make such a triangle is not a serious issue. It just forces us to restate our simple statement in a more complicated way. "To say that God is almighty means that God can do anything that does not involve logical contra-diction." Or we can follow Thomas Aquinas, who remarked that it was not that God could not do such things; it was simply that such things cannot be done.

Yet theology is about rather more than such logical riddles. The real issue concerns the divine nature itself. We can begin to engage with this important matter by considering a question beloved of medieval philosophers: "Can God force someone who loves him to hate him?"

Again, you might like to pause at this point, and think about this, perhaps discussing it in a group. At first sight, the question seems a little strange. Why should God want to turn someone's love into hatred? The question appears unreal and pointless. On closer examination, however, the question begins to make sense. At one level, there is no problem. "To say that God is almighty means that God can do anything that does not involve logical contradiction." There is clearly no such contradiction here. God must have the ability to turn someone's love into hatred. Yet there is obviously a deeper issue here, concerning the *character* of God. Can we ever imagine God *wanting* to do this?

To make this important point clearer, let us ask another question. "Can God break promises?" There is no logical contradiction involved in breaking promises. It happens all the time. It may be regrettable, but there is no intellectual difficulty here. If God can do anything that does not involve a logical contradiction, God can certainly break a promise.

Yet, for Christians, this suggestion is outrageous. God is someone who remains faithful to what has been promised. If we cannot trust God, whom can we trust? The suggestion that God might break a promise contradicts a vital aspect of God's character – namely, God's faithfulness and truthfulness. One of the great themes of both Old

and New Testaments is the total trustworthiness and reliability of God. Humans may fail; God remains faithful. Consider these biblical verses:

> "Know therefore that the Lord your God is God. He is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations" (Deuteronomy 7.9).

> "The Lord is faithful to all his promises" (Psalm 145:13).

There is clearly a tension between power and trust. An all-powerful cheater can make promises which cannot be relied upon. Yet one of the greatest insights of the Christian faith is that we know a God who *could* do anything – but who *chose* to redeem us. God did not need to enter into a covenant with Israel – but God chose to do so, and having done so, remains faithful to this promise. We see here the important idea of divine self-limitation – the notion that God freely chooses to behave in certain ways, and in doing so, places limits on divine action. God cannot be accused of acting arbitrarily or whimsically; rather, God acts reliably and faithfully.

If God is indeed revealed in Christ, we must realize that God's power is not symbolized by the sword or the chariot – common symbols of military and political might in the world of his day – but by the cross, a symbol associated with shame, defeat, and *powerlessness*. Perhaps the most dramatic statement of this notion of divine self-limitation can be found in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*, dating from the closing years of the Second World War:

> God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us … The Bible directs us to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help.

In an age which has become increasingly suspicious of the idea of "power," it is important to be reminded that talk about "an almighty God" does not imply that God is a tyrant. For Bonhoeffer, it means that God chooses to stand alongside people in their powerlessness – a major theme in interpretations of the cross of Christ, to which we shall return in chapter 5.

But let us return to the question with which we began. Can God do *anything*? The commonsense answer would be simple and straightforward. If God is almighty, God must be capable of doing anything. Yet Christian theology insists that God's omnipotence is to be set within the context of God's nature – that of a righteous and faithful God, whose promises are to be trusted. As proves so often to be the case, we must be very careful in transferring concepts from their human contexts and using them when referring to God.

Can God suffer?

Is God moved and saddened by the suffering of the world and human beings? Or is God's involvement with such suffering deeper than this? Can we also speak of God suffering? There is no doubt that the Christian tradition portrays God as affected and moved by the suffering of the created order. Scholarly works such as Abraham Heschel's *God of the Prophets* (1930) and T. E. Fretheim's *Suffering of God* (1984) drew attention to the way in which the Old Testament often portrayed God as sharing in the pain of Israel. This idea is echoed and developed in the New Testament, often through forging a connection between the love of God and the suffering of Christ on the cross.

So can we go further, and speak of God *suffering*, rather than just sympathizing with human suffering? Traditionally, Christian theology has been resistant to such an idea, seeing the idea of divine suffering as implying divine imperfection. To understand this association of ideas, we need to appreciate the subtle influence of Hellenistic philosophical ideas on the development of Christian thinking in the patristic period. The idea of divine impassibility (Greek: *apatheia*) was seen by many Greek philosophers as linked with the idea of the perfection of God. To be perfect is to be unchanging and self-sufficient. This idea is clearly stated by Philo of Alexandria (ca. 30 BC–ca. AD 45), a Hellenistic Jew whose writings were much admired by early Christian writers. Philo's treatise *That God Is Unchangeable* vigorously defended the impassibility of God. "What greater impiety could there be than to suppose that the Unchangeable changes?"

Yet while the idea of an impassible God achieved considerable influence during the patristic and medieval periods, there were protests

against these developments. For example, Martin Luther's "theology of the cross," which emerged during the period 1518–19, speaks explicitly of a suffering and crucified God. A "theology of the cross" discerns God as being hidden in the suffering and humiliation of the cross of Christ. Luther deliberately uses the provocative and perhaps puzzling phrase "a crucified God," as he speaks of the manner in which God shares in the sufferings of the crucified Christ.

The English Methodist theologian Charles Wesley also saw the incarnation as making it possible to speak of the suffering of God. In one of his hymns, Wesley uses a dramatic turn of phrase to express his belief that the incarnation brings God directly into contact with the experience of suffering and death: "Impassive He suffers; Immortal He dies."

These ideas gained wider acceptance in the late twentieth century, as the idea of a suffering God became the new orthodoxy, mainly within sections of Protestantism. In part, the pressure for such a change of emphasis came from the rise of "protest atheism," which gained influence after the First World War. "Protest atheism" raised a serious moral objection to belief in God. How could anyone believe in a God who was above such suffering and pain in the world?

Two theological works were of particular importance in bringing about this change in thinking. In *A Theology of the Pain of God* (1946), the Japanese writer Kazoh Kitamori (1916–98) argued that true love was rooted in pain. "God is the wounded Lord, having pain in himself." God is able to give meaning and dignity to human suffering on account of the fact that he also is in pain, and suffers. Kitamori drew on Luther's "theology of the cross," seeing this as having a special relevance to Japan in the aftermath of its defeat in the Second World War, and the nuclear annihilation of the populations of two of its cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Probably the most important recent discussion of the suffering of God is due to the German theologian Jürgen Moltmann (born 1926). In his *Crucified God* (1972), Moltmann argued that a God who cannot suffer is a *deficient*, not a perfect, God. Stressing that God cannot be *forced* to change or undergo suffering, Moltmann declares that God willed to undergo suffering. The suffering of God is the direct consequence of the divine *decision* to suffer, and the divine *willingness* to suffer. The

nature of love is such that it involves the lover participating in the sufferings of the beloved.

> A God who cannot suffer is poorer than any human. For a God who is incapable of suffering is a being who cannot be involved. Suffering and injustice do not affect him. And because he is so completely insensitive, he cannot be affected or shaken by anything. He cannot weep, for he has no tears. But the one who cannot suffer cannot love either. So he is also a loveless being.

For Moltmann, the Father and the Son both suffer – but they experience that suffering in different ways. The Son suffers the pain and death of the cross; the Father gives up and suffers the loss of the Son.

Many modern theologians are resistant to the idea of suffering God, seeing this as unnecessary and improper. The Catholic theologian Thomas Weinandy (born 1946), for example, argued that patristic writers did not think of God as "static, lifeless and inert, and so completely devoid of passion." In his work *Does God Suffer?* (2000), Weinandy argued that the idea of God being above suffering provides a perfectly adequate framework for dealing with the problem of suffering. Moltmann has in effect reduced the passion and death of Jesus to the mythical ahistorical expression of what is taking place within the Trinity itself.

Engaging with a text

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992) is one of the most important theological documents of the twentieth century, and has won much admiration for its clarity of presentation. In its discussion of what it means to refer to God as "father," the *Catechism* brings together a number of important points, all of which are worth careful consideration. Here is the text.

> By calling God "Father," the language of faith indicates two main things: that God is the first origin of everything and transcendent authority; and that he is at the same time goodness and loving care for all his children.

God's parental tenderness can also be expressed by the image of motherhood, which emphasizes God's immanence, the intimacy between Creator and creature. The language of faith thus draws on the human experience of parents, who are in a way the first representatives of God for man. But this experience also tells us that human parents are fallible and can disfigure the face of fatherhood and motherhood. We ought therefore to recall that God transcends the human distinction between the sexes. He is neither man nor woman: he is God. He also transcends human fatherhood and motherhood, although he is their origin and standard: no one is father as God is Father.

You may find the following framework helpful as you interact with this text, on your own or within a discussion group.

1. What are the two main points that the *Catechism* believes are made through using the image of God as father? You might like to try and identify some biblical passages which underlie these.
2. The *Catechism* also stresses the importance of maternal imagery. In what ways does this supplement the paternal imagery? And how are these themes held together by an appeal to the "parental" love of God?
3. What do you think the *Catechism* means when it says that "no one is father as God is Father"?

Having considered some aspects of the Christian understanding of God, we now turn to focus on one specific aspect of God's identity – the creator of the world.

CHAPTER 3

Creation

The Apostles' Creed declares that God is "creator of heaven and earth." This theme is found throughout the Christian Bible, and is the first theme that the reader of the Bible encounters when reading that work in its canonical order – in other words, when beginning with the book of Genesis (a Greek word, which literally means "beginning" or "origin"), whose opening sentence is "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). It is therefore appropriate to begin this chapter by exploring the Old Testament understanding of creation. What does it mean to say that God is creator?

Creation in the Old Testament

The theme of "God as creator" is of major importance within the Old Testament. Attention has often focused on the creation narratives found in the first two chapters of the book of Genesis, with which the Old Testament canon opens. However, it must be appreciated that the theme is deeply embedded throughout the Old Testament. It is found in all three of the major types of Old Testament writings – the historical, wisdom, and prophetic literature. For example, Job 38:1–42:6 (a form of wisdom literature) sets out what is unquestionably the most comprehensive understanding of God as creator to be found in the Old Testament, stressing the role of God as creator and sustainer of the world.

Figure 7   William Blake's *The Ancient of Days*, 1794, relief etching with watercolor, 23.3 × 16.8 cm. British Museum, London. Blake here depicts God speaking out of the whirlwind, described in Job 38–42. AKG Images/Erich Lessing.

It is possible to discern two distinct, though related, contexts in which the notion of "God as creator" is encountered in the Old Testament: first, in contexts which reflect the praise of God within Israel's worship, both individual and corporate; and secondly, in contexts which stress that the God who created the world is also the God who liberated the people of Israel from bondage, and continues to sustain them in the present.

Of particular interest for our purposes is the Old Testament theme of "creation as ordering," and the manner in which the critically important theme of "order" is established on and justified with reference to cosmological foundations. It has often been pointed out how the Old Testament portrays creation in terms of an engagement with and victory over forces of chaos. This theme of creation as the "establishment of cosmic order" is generally represented in two different ways:

1. Creation is understood as the imposition of order on a formless chaos. This model is especially associated with the image of a

potter working clay into a recognizably ordered structure (e.g., Isaiah 29:16; 44:8; Jeremiah 18:1–6).

2. Creation is understood as God's victorious conflict with a series of chaotic forces, often depicted as a dragon or another monster (variously named "Behemoth," "Leviathan," "Nahar," "Rahab," "Tannim," or "Yam") who must be subdued (Job 3:8; 7:12; 9:13; 40:15–32; Psalm 74:13–15; 139:10–11; Isaiah 27:1; 41:9–10; Zechariah 10:11).

It is clear that there are parallels between the Old Testament account of God engaging with the forces of chaos and similar accounts found in other religious texts of the ancient Near East – for example, Ugaritic and Canaanite mythology. Nevertheless, there are significant differences, not least the Old Testament's insistence that the forces of chaos are not themselves to be seen as divine. Creation is not to be understood simply as the forming or shaping of the universe, but in terms of God's mastery of chaos and ordering of the world.

Perhaps one of the most significant consequences of this Old Testament concept of creation is that *nature is not divine*. The Genesis creation account stresses that God created the moon, sun, and stars. The significance of this point is too easily overlooked. Each of these celestial entities was worshipped as divine in the ancient world. Many of these were worshipped as gods by Israel's neighbors. By asserting that they were created by God, the Old Testament is insisting that they are subordinate to God, and have no intrinsic divine nature.

The concept of creation "out of nothing"

Having briefly introduced some aspects of the concept of creation, we may now pass on to consider some of its aspects in a more theological manner. One of the most important developments of the doctrine of creation arose in response to the Gnostic controversy of the second century. For Gnosticism, in most of its significant forms, a sharp distinction was to be drawn between the God who redeemed humanity from the world, and a somewhat inferior deity (often termed "the demiurge") who created that world in the first place.

The Gnostics thus regarded the Old Testament as dealing with this lesser deity, whereas the New Testament was concerned with the

redeemer God. Christians, however, saw both Testaments as referring to one and the same God – a God who both creates and redeems. (This idea of the continuity of divine action is often referred to as the "economy of salvation.") As such, belief in God as creator and in the authority of the Old Testament came to be interlinked at an early stage in Christian theology. Of the early writers to deal with this theme, Irenaeus of Lyons is of particular importance.

A distinct, though related, debate centered on the question of creation "out of nothing" (Latin: *ex nihilo*). It must be remembered that Christianity initially took root and then expanded in the eastern Mediterranean world of the first and second centuries, which was dominated by various Greek pagan philosophies. The general Greek pagan understanding of the origins of the world could be summarized as follows. God is not to be thought of as having *created* the world. Rather, God is to be thought of as an architect, who imposed order on preexistent matter. Matter was already present within the universe, and did not require to be created; it needed to be given a definite shape and structure. God was therefore thought of as the one who fashioned the world from this already existing matter. Thus in one of his dialogues (*Timaeus*), Plato developed the idea that the world was made out of preexistent matter, which was fashioned into the present form of the world.

This idea was taken up by most Gnostic writers, who were here followed by individual Christian theologians such as Theophilus of Antioch (died ca. 184) and Justin Martyr. They professed a belief in preexistent matter, which was shaped into the world in the act of creation. In other words, creation was not *ex nihilo*; rather, it was to be seen as an act of construction, on the basis of material which was already to hand, as one might construct an igloo out of snow, or a house from bricks. The existence of evil in the world was thus to be explained on the basis of the intractability of this preexistent matter. God's options in creating the world were limited by the poor quality of the material available. The presence of evil or defects within the world are thus not to be ascribed to God, but to deficiencies in the material from which the world was constructed.

However, the conflict with Gnosticism forced reconsideration of this issue. In part, the idea of creation from preexistent matter was discredited by its Gnostic associations; in part, it was called into question by

an increasingly sophisticated reading of the Old Testament creation narratives. Reacting against this Platonist worldview, several major Christian writers of the second and third centuries argued that *everything* had to be created by God. There was no preexistent matter; everything required to be created out of nothing. Irenaeus argued that the Christian doctrine of creation affirmed the inherent goodness of creation, which contrasted sharply with the Gnostic idea that the material world was evil.

Tertullian (ca. 155–230) emphasized the divine decision to create the world. The existence of the world is itself due to God's freedom and goodness, not to any inherent necessity arising from the nature of matter. The world depends on God for its existence. This contrasted sharply with the Aristotelian view that the world depended on nothing for its existence, and that the particular structure of the world was intrinsically necessary. Yet not all Christian theologians adopted this position at this early stage in the emergence of the Christian tradition. Origen, perhaps one of the most Platonist of early Christian writers, clearly regarded the doctrine of creation from preexistent matter to have more going for it than its critics allowed.

Creation and dualism

The central issue relating to the doctrine of creation which had to be debated in the first period of Christian theology was thus that of *dualism* – a view of the world which holds that there are two ultimately distinct principles, or spheres, such as good and evil, or matter and spirit. The classic example of this is found in some of the forms of Gnosticism, so forcefully opposed by Irenaeus, which argued for the existence of two gods – a supreme god, who was the source of the invisible spiritual world, and a lesser deity who created the world of material things. This approach is strongly dualist, in that it sets up a fundamental tension between the spiritual realm (which is seen as being good) and the material realm (which is seen as being evil). The doctrine of creation affirmed that the material world was created good by God, despite its subsequent contamination by sin. A similar outlook is associated with Manichaeism, a Gnostic worldview which Augustine of Hippo found attractive as a young man.

By the end of the fourth century, most Christian theologians had rejected the Platonist approach, even in the form associated with Origen, and argued for God being the creator of both the spiritual and material worlds. The Nicene Creed opens with a declaration of faith in God as "maker of heaven and earth," thus affirming the divine creation of both the spiritual and material realms. During the Middle Ages, forms of dualism once more made their appearance, particularly in the views of some heretical sects. The Cathars and Albigenses, for example, taught that matter is evil, and was created *ex nihilo* by the devil. Against such views, the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) taught explicitly that God created a good creation out of nothing.

> We firmly believe and openly confess that there is only one true God … the one principle of the universe, Creator of all things invisible and visible, spiritual and physical, who from the beginning of time and by his omnipotent power made everything from nothing [*ex nihilo*].

Implications of the doctrine of creation

The doctrine of God as creator has several major implications, of which four may be noted here.

First, a distinction must be drawn between God and the creation. A major theme of Christian theology from the earliest of times has been to resist the temptation to merge the creator and the creation. The theme is clearly stated in Paul's letter to the Romans, the opening chapter of which criticizes the tendency to reduce God to the level of the world. According to Paul, there is a natural human tendency, as a result of sin, to serve "created things rather than the creator" (Romans 1:25). A central task of a Christian theology of creation is to distinguish God from the creation, while at the same time to affirm that it is *God's* creation.

This process is clearly seen from the writings of the sixteenth-century Protestant theologian John Calvin, who wanted to develop a world-affirming spirituality to counter the general monastic tendency to renounce the world, evident in writings such as Thomas à Kempis's (1380–1471) *Imitation of Christ*, with its characteristic emphasis upon the "contempt of the world." There is a dialectic in Calvin's thought

between the world as the creation of God himself, and the world as the fallen creation. In that it is God's creation, it is to be honored, respected, and affirmed; in that it is a fallen creation, it is to be criticized with the object of redeeming it. These two insights could be described as the twin foci of the ellipse of Calvin's world-affirming spirituality. A similar pattern can be discerned in Calvin's doctrine of human nature, where – despite his stress upon the sinful nature of fallen humanity – he never loses sight of the fact that it remains God's creation. Though stained by sin, it remains the creation and possession of God, and is to be valued for that reason. The doctrine of creation thus leads to a critical world-affirming spirituality, in which the world is affirmed, without falling into the snare of treating it as if it were God.

In the second place, creation implies God's authority over the world. A characteristic biblical emphasis is that the creator has authority over the creation. Humans are thus regarded as part of that creation, with special functions within it. The doctrine of creation leads to the idea of *human stewardship of the creation*, which is to be contrasted with a secular notion of *human ownership of the world*. The creation is not ours; we hold it in trust for God. We are meant to be the stewards of God's creation, and are responsible for the manner in which we exercise that steward-ship. This insight is of major importance in relation to ecological and environmental concerns, in that it provides a theoretical foundation for the exercise of human responsibility toward the planet.

In the third place, the doctrine of God as creator implies the good-ness of creation. Throughout the first biblical account of creation, we encounter the affirmation: "And God saw that it was good" (Genesis 1:10, 18, 21, 25, 31). (The only thing, incidentally, that is "not good" is that Adam is alone. Humanity is created as a social being, and is meant to exist in relation with others.) There is no place in Christian theology for the Gnostic or dualist idea of the world as an inherently evil place. As we shall explore elsewhere, even though the world is fallen through sin, it remains God's good creation, and capable of being redeemed.

This is not to say that the creation is presently perfect. An essential component of the Christian doctrine of sin is the recognition that the world has departed from the trajectory upon which God placed it in the work of creation. It has become deflected from its intended course. It has fallen from the glory in which it was created. The world as we see it is not the world as it was intended to be. The existence of human

sin, evil, and death is itself a token of the extent of the departure of the created order from its intended pattern.

For this reason, most Christian reflections on redemption include the idea of some kind of restoration of creation to its original integrity, in order that God's intentions for his creation might find fulfillment. Affirming the goodness of creation also avoids the suggestion, unacceptable to most theologians, that God is responsible for evil. The constant biblical emphasis upon the goodness of creation is a reminder that the destructive force of sin is not present in the world by God's design or permission.

In the fourth place, the doctrine of creation affirms that human beings are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–7). This insight, central to any Christian doctrine of human nature, is of major importance as an aspect of the doctrine of creation itself. "You made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you" (Augustine of Hippo). The doctrine of creation thus provides the basis for a proper understanding of human experience, nature, and destiny. We shall return to this theme shortly.

Models of God as creator

The manner in which God acts as creator has been the subject of intense discussion within the Christian tradition. A number of models of, or ways of picturing, the manner in which God is to be thought of as creating the world have been developed, each of which casts some light on the complex and rich Christian understanding of the notion of "creation."

1. *Emanation*. This term was widely used by early Christian writers to clarify the relation between God and the world. Although the term is not used by either Plato or Plotinus, many patristic writers sympathetic to the various forms of Platonism saw it as a convenient and appropriate way of articulating Platonic insights. The image that dominates this approach is that of light or heat radiating from the sun, or a human source such as a fire. This image of creation (hinted at in the Nicene Creed's phrase "light from light") suggests that the creation of the world can be regarded as an overflowing of the creative

energy of God. God is to the universe as the sun is to light. The sun is the source of light, but does not itself require illumination. Just as light derives from the sun and reflects its nature, so the created order derives from God, and expresses the divine nature. There is, on the basis of this model, a *natural* or *organic* connection between God and the creation.

However, the model has weaknesses, of which two are of particular importance. First, the image of a sun radiating light, or a fire radiating heat, implies an involuntary emanation, rather than a conscious divine decision to create. The Christian tradition has consistently emphasized that the act of creation rests upon a prior decision on the part of God to create, which this model cannot adequately express.

This naturally leads on to the second weakness, which relates to the impersonal nature of the model in question. The idea of a personal God, expressing a personality both in the very act of creation and the subsequent creation itself, is difficult to convey by this image. Nevertheless, the model clearly articulates a close connection between creator and creation, leading us to expect that something of the identity and nature of the creator is to be found in the creation. Thus the beauty of God – a theme which was of particular importance in early medieval theology, and has emerged as significant again in the later writings of Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–88) – would be expected to be reflected in the nature of the creation.

2. *Construction*. Many biblical passages portray God as a master builder, deliberately constructing the world (for example, Psalm 127:1). The imagery is powerful, conveying the ideas of purpose, planning, and a deliberate intention to create. The image is important, in that it draws attention to both the creator and the creation. In addition to bringing out the skill of the creator, it also allows the beauty and ordering of the resulting creation to be appreciated, both for what it is in itself, and for its testimony to the creativity and care of its creator.

However, the image has a deficiency, which relates to a point we noted in connection with Plato's dialogue *Timaeus*. This portrays creation as involving preexistent matter. Here, creation is understood as giving shape and form to something which is already there – an idea which, we have seen, causes at least a degree of tension with the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. The image of God as a builder would seem

to imply the assembly of the world from material which is already to hand, which is clearly deficient.

Nevertheless, despite this difficulty, it can be seen that the model expresses the insight that the character of the creator is, in some manner, expressed in the natural world, just as that of an artist is communicated or embodied in her work. In particular, the notion of "ordering" – that is, the imparting or imposing of a coherence or structure to the material in question – is clearly affirmed by this model. Whatever else the complex notion of "creation" may mean within a Christian context, it certainly includes the fundamental theme of ordering – a notion which is especially significant in the creation narratives of the Old Testament.

3. *Artistic expression*. Many Christian writers, from various periods in the history of the church, speak of creation as the "handiwork of God," comparing it to a work of art which is both beautiful in itself, as well as expressing the personality of its creator. This model of creation as the "artistic expression" of God as creator is particularly well expressed in the writings of the eighteenth-century North American theologian Jonathan Edwards (1703–58).

The image supplements a deficiency of both the two models noted above – namely, their impersonal character. The image of God as artist conveys the idea of personal expression in the creation of something beautiful. Once more, the potential weaknesses need to be noted; for example, the model could easily lead to the idea of creation from pre-existent matter, as in the case of a sculptor with a statue carved from an already existing block of stone. However, the model offers us at least the possibility of thinking about creation from nothing, as with the author who writes a novel, or the composer who creates a melody and harmony. It also encourages us to seek for the self-expression of God in the creation, and gives added theological credibility to a natural theology. There is also a natural link between the concept of creation as "artistic expression" and the highly significant concept of "beauty."

Humanity and creation: the "image of God"

"What are human beings, that you are mindful of them?" (Psalm 8:4). From the beginning of history, people have wondered about their

place in the greater scheme of things. Why are we here? What is our destiny? What is the meaning of human existence? The doctrine of creation offers a framework for understanding and appreciating these questions.

One of the most fundamental themes of a Christian doctrine of creation is that humanity has been created "in the image of God" (Genesis 1:27). This brief yet deeply significant phrase opens the way to a right understanding of human nature, and our overall place within the created order. Although humanity is not divine, it possesses a relationship with God which is different from that of other creatures. *Humanity bears the image of God*. For some, this is a statement of the privileged position of humanity within creation. Yet, for most Christian theologians, it is above all an affirmation of *responsibility* and *accountability* towards the world in which we live.

So how are we to understand this relationship to God? How can we visualize it? A number of models have been developed within Christian theology, of which we may note four. Each is worth close scrutiny in its own right.

1. *The sovereignty of God*. The "image of God" can be seen as a reminder of the authority of God over humanity. In the ancient Near East, monarchs would often display images of themselves as an assertion of their power in a region (see, for example, the golden statue of Nebuchadnezzar, described in Daniel 3:1–7). To be created in the "image of God" could therefore be understood as being *accountable to God*. This important point underlies an incident in the ministry of Jesus Christ (Luke 20:22–5). Challenged as to whether it was right for Jews to pay taxes to the Roman authorities, Jesus requested that a coin be brought to him. He asked, "Whose image and title does it bear?" Those standing around replied that it was Caesar's. Christ then tells the crowd to give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's. While some might take this to be an evasion of the question, it is nothing of the sort. It is a reminder that those who bear God's image – that is, humanity – must dedicate themselves to him.

2. *Human correspondence to God*. The idea of the "image of God" can be taken to refer to some kind of correspondence between human reason and the rationality of God as creator. On this understanding of things, there is an intrinsic resonance between the structures of the world and human reasoning. This approach is set out with

particular clarity in Augustine's major theological writing *On the Trinity*:

> The image of the creator is to be found in the rational or intellectual soul of humanity … [The human soul] has been created according to the image of God in order that it may use reason and intellect in order to apprehend and behold God.

For Augustine, we have been created with the intellectual resources which can set us on the way to finding God by reflecting on the creation.

In more recent years, the importance of this point has been explored by the physicist turned theologian John Polkinghorne, formerly professor of theoretical physics at Cambridge University. Polkinghorne points out that some of the most beautiful patterns thought up by the mathematicians are found actually to occur in the structure of the physical world around us. There seems to be some deep-seated relationship between the reason within (the rationality of our minds – in this case mathematics) and the reason without (the rational order and structure of the physical world around us). The two fit together like a glove. So why are our minds so perfectly shaped to understand the deep patterns of the world around us?

Polkinghorne argues that there seems to be some kind of "resonance" or "harmonization" between the ordering of the world and the capacity of the human mind to discern and represent it. "If the deep-seated congruence of the rationality present in our minds with the rationality present in the world is to find a true explanation, it must surely lie in some more profound reason which is the ground of both. Such a reason would be provided by the Rationality of the Creator."

3. *Image and relationality.* A third approach holds that the "image of God" is about the capacity to relate to God. To be created in the "image of God" is to possess the potential to enter into a relationship with God. The term "image" here expresses the idea that God has created humanity with a specific goal – namely, to relate to God. This theme has played a major role in Christian spirituality. We are meant to exist in a relationship with our creator and redeemer.

This has been an important theme in the writings of C. S. Lewis (1898–1963). For Lewis, there is a God-shaped gap within us, which

only God can fill. And in his absence, we experience a deep sense of longing – a longing which is really for God, but which fallen and sinful humanity misreads, accidentally or deliberately, as a longing for things within the world. And these things never satisfy. If we are made for God, and God alone, then there is nothing else that will satisfy. And, as Lewis constantly pointed out, this God-given sense of longing proves a key to answering the great questions of life with which humanity has wrestled.

4. *Image and storytelling*. One of the most characteristic features of human beings is that they tell stories in order to preserve memories, safeguard personal and communal identity, and make sense of the world around them. J. R. R. Tolkien (1892–1973) argued that there was a theological basis for this capacity: we are created with some narrative template within us, which means that the image of God is imprinted and reflected in the stories that we create. The human instinct to tell stories of meaning was grounded in a Christian doctrine of creation, and offered a theological explanation for our love of narration.

Tolkien suggested that our innate capacity and tendency to create stories – such as his own great fantasy epic of the *Lord of the Rings* – is the result of being created in the "image of God." "Fantasy remains a human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker." Tolkien is often described as developing a "theology of sub-creation," in that he holds that human beings create stories which are ultimately patterned on the "Grand Story" of God. We unconsciously tell stories which are patterned along the lines of this great story of creation and redemption, and which reflect our true destiny as lying with God. For Tolkien, one of the great strengths of the Christian narrative was its ability to explain why human beings tell stories of meaning in the first place.

Creation and natural theology

The concept of "natural theology" is open to many interpretations, but its core theme is that there is some correlation between God as creator and the observable world of nature as the creation. So if God created the

Figure 8   *The Triumph of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, painting by Benozzo Gozzoli, ca. 1420–97, tempera. Musée du Louvre, Paris. The Art Archive/Musée du Louvre, Paris/Gianni Dagli Orti.

world, what may be known of God from the natural world? This question has been debated within Christian theology for centuries. "The heavens declare the glory of God; the heavens proclaim the work of God's hands" (Psalm 19:1). This well-known text can be seen as representing a general theme within the Christian Bible – that something of the wisdom of the God who made the world can be known through the world that was created. The exploration of this theme has proved to be one of the most fruitful areas of theology. We begin our discussion by considering what is widely regarded as a landmark in this matter – the contribution of Thomas Aquinas.

Thomas Aquinas's *Summa contra Gentiles* was written during the period 1259–61, initially at Paris and subsequently at Naples. One of

its most significant discussions concerns the manner in which God may be understood to be related to the creation – a relationship which Aquinas analyzes in terms of causality, as follows.

For Aquinas, there exists a fundamental "likeness [*similitudo*] to God" within the created order as a consequence of God being the cause, in some sense of the word, of all created things. In that no created thing can be said to come into existence spontaneously, the existence of all things can be considered to be a consequence of a relationship of causal dependence between the creation and its creator. Using what are essentially Aristotelian categories of causality, Aquinas sets out a position which we may summarize as follows:

1. Suppose that A causes B;
2. Suppose also that A possesses a quality Q;
3. Then B will also possess that quality Q as a result of its being caused by A.

The full argument set out by Aquinas is complex, and not without its difficulties; nevertheless, its conclusion is clear. There are, so to speak, physical or metaphysical fingerprints within creation, which provide the basis for an inductive argument to the existence of its cause and origins. If God made the world, God's "signature" (so to speak) may be found within the created order. Thomas Aquinas puts this point as follows:

> Meditation on [God's] works enables us, at least to some extent, to admire and reflect on God's wisdom … We are thus able to infer God's wisdom from reflection upon God's works … This consideration of God's works leads to an admiration of God's sublime power, and consequently inspires reverence for God in human hearts … This consideration also incites human souls to the love of God's goodness … If the goodness, beauty, and wonder of creatures are so delightful to the human mind, the fountainhead of God's own goodness (compared with the trickles of goodness found in creatures) will draw excited human minds entirely to itself.

Something of the torrent of God's beauty can thus be known in the rivulets of the beauty of the creation.

Another theologian to explore this issue is John Calvin. The first book of Calvin's *Institutes* opens with discussion of this fundamental

problem of Christian theology: how do we know anything about God? Calvin affirms that a general knowledge of God may be discerned throughout the creation – in humanity, in the natural order, and in the historical process itself. Two main grounds of such knowledge are identified, one subjective, the other objective.

The first ground is a "sense of divinity" (*sensus divinitatis*) or a "seed of religion" (*semen religionis*), which has been planted within every human being by God. God has endowed human beings with some inbuilt sense or presentiment of the divine existence. It is as if something about God has been engraved in the heart of every human being. Calvin identifies three consequences of this inbuilt awareness of divinity: the universality of religion (which, if uninformed by the Christian revelation, degenerates into idolatry), a troubled conscience, and a servile fear of God. All of these, Calvin suggests, may serve as points of contact for the Christian proclamation.

The second ground of knowledge of God as creator lies in experience of and reflection upon the ordering of the world. The fact that God is creator, together with an appreciation of the divine wisdom and justice, may be gained from an inspection of the created order, culminating in humanity itself.

It is important to stress that Calvin makes no suggestion whatsoever that this knowledge of God from the created order is peculiar to, or even restricted to, Christian believers. Calvin is arguing that *anyone*, by intelligent and rational reflection upon the created order, should be able to arrive at the idea of God. The created order is a "theater" or a "mirror" for the displaying of the divine presence, nature, and attribute. Although invisible and incomprehensible, God wills to be known under the form of created and visible things within creation. The creator God can be known, although to a limited extent, through the creation itself.

Calvin then introduces the notion of revelation. Scripture reiterates what may be known of God through nature, while simultaneously clarifying this general revelation and enhancing it. "The knowledge of God, which is clearly shown in the ordering of the world and in all creatures, is still more clearly and familiarly explained in the Word." It is only through scripture that the believer has access to knowledge of the redeeming actions of God in history, culminating in the life, death,

and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For Calvin, revelation is focused upon the person of Jesus Christ; our knowledge of God is mediated through him. God may thus be fully known only through Jesus Christ, who may in turn be known only through scripture. However, the created order provides important points of contact for this revelation.

The basic idea is that a knowledge of God the creator may be had both through nature and through revelation, with the latter clarifying, confirming, and extending what may be known through the former. Knowledge of God the redeemer – which for Calvin is a distinctively *Christian* knowledge of God – may only be had by the Christian revelation, in Christ and through scripture.

Yet not all theologians are persuaded of the merits and legitimacy of natural theology. Perhaps the most negative attitude to have been adopted in recent Christian theology is that of Karl Barth, whose 1934 controversy with Emil Brunner over this issue has become a landmark in theological debate. In 1934, Brunner published a work entitled *Nature and Grace*. In this work, he argued that "the task of our theological generation is to find a way back to a legitimate natural theology." Brunner located this approach in the doctrine of creation, specifically the idea that human beings are created in the *imago Dei*, the "image of God." Human nature is constituted in such a way that there is an analogue with the being of God. Despite the sinfulness of human nature, the ability to discern God in nature remains. Sinful human beings remain able to recognize God in nature and in the events of history, and to be aware of their guilt before God. There is thus a "point of contact" for divine revelation within human nature as a consequence of the doctrine of creation.

Brunner argued that human nature is constituted in such a way that there is a ready-made point of contact for divine revelation. Revelation thus addresses itself to a human nature which already has some idea of what that revelation is about. For example, take the gospel demand to "repent of sin." Brunner argues that this makes little sense unless human beings already have some idea of what "sin" is. The gospel demand to repent is thus addressed to an audience which already has at least something of an idea of what "sin" and "repentance" might mean. Revelation brings with it a fuller understanding of what sin means – but in doing so, it builds upon an existing human awareness of sin.

Barth reacted angrily to this suggestion. His published reply to Brunner – which brought their longstanding friendship to an abrupt end – has one of the shortest titles in the history of religious publishing: *Nein!* ("No!"). Barth was determined to say "no!" to Brunner's positive evaluation of natural theology. It seemed to imply that God needed help to become known, or that human beings somehow cooperated with God in the act of revelation. For Barth, this subverted God's freedom and sovereignty in revelation. "The Holy Spirit … needs no point of contact other than that which that same Spirit establishes," was his angry retort. For Barth, there was no "point of contact" inherent within human nature. Any such "point of contact" was itself the result of divine revelation. It is something that is evoked by the Word of God, rather than something which is a permanent feature of human nature.

Underlying this exchange is another matter, which is too easily overlooked. Beneath Brunner's appeal to nature is an idea, which can be traced back to Luther, known as "the orders of creation." According to Luther, God providentially established certain "orders" within creation, in order to prevent it collapsing into chaos. Those orders included the family, the church, and the state. (The close alliance between the church and the state in German Lutheran thought can be seen as reflecting this idea.) Nineteenth-century German liberal Protestantism had absorbed this idea, and developed a theology which allowed German culture, including a positive assessment of the state, to become of major importance theologically.

So why is this important? The Barth–Brunner debate took place in 1934, the year in which Adolf Hitler gained power in Germany. This raised a series of difficulties for the idea of the "orders" of creation, as it appeared to create conceptual space for governments to be seen as divinely authorized, or reflecting the nature of God. Part of Barth's concern was that Brunner, perhaps unwittingly, had laid a theological foundation for allowing the state to become a model for God. And who, Barth wondered, really wanted to model God on Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany and its institutions?

Others, however, have wondered about the accuracy of this criticism. Does the belief that God can be known to some limited extent really imply that we construct God in the image of Hitler? Critics of Barth, such as the Old Testament scholar James Barr (1924–2006), argued that this was a remote possibility, which had been given undue

credibility in Barth's writings on account of the political situation of his day. Rightly understood, natural theology had little, if anything, to do with the political situation in Nazi Germany. Yet Barth's critique of natural theology remains significant, despite this cautionary comment.

Creation and creationism

In recent years, especially in North America, controversy has emerged over how the opening chapters of the book of Genesis are to be interpreted, and how these relate to the scientific discussion of the biological evolution of humanity. The term "creationism" has come to be used to refer to writers who hold that humanity was brought into existence in its present form by a direct creative act of God. This stands in contrast to the standard evolutionary model, based on Charles Darwin's *Descent of Man*, which holds that humanity evolved into its present form over an extended period of time. At least four positions on this matter can be identified in contemporary North American Protestantism.

One approach is known as "young earth creationism." This position represents the continuation of interpretations of the book of Genesis that were widely encountered in popular and at least some academic writing before 1800. On this view, the earth was created in its basic form between 6,000 and 10,000 years ago. Young earth creationists generally read the first two chapters of the book of Genesis very literally, in a way that allows for no living creatures of any kind before Eden, and no death before the Fall. Most young earth creationists hold that all living things were created simultaneously, within the time frame proposed by the Genesis creation accounts, with the Hebrew word *yom* ("day") meaning a period of twenty-four hours. This view, of course, encounters considerable scientific difficulties, not least from fossil records, which point to a much greater timescale and to the existence of extinct species.

An alternative version is known as "old earth creationism." This is probably the majority viewpoint within conservative Protestant circles. It has no particular difficulty with the vast age of the world, and argues that the "young earth" approach requires modification in at least two respects. First, that the term "day" in the Genesis creation accounts is to be interpreted as a long period of time, not a specific period of

twenty-four hours. Second, that there may be a large chronological gap between Genesis 1.1 and Genesis 1.2. In other words, there may be a substantial period of time intervening between the primordial act of creation of the universe, and the emergence of life on earth. This viewpoint is advocated by the famous Scofield Reference Bible, first published in 1909, although the ideas can be traced back to writers such as the earlier nineteenth-century Scottish divine Thomas Chalmers (1780–1847).

A third possibility has gained much attention in recent years, and is generally known as "Intelligent Design." This approach argues that biological life shows an "irreducible complexity" which makes it impossible to explain its origins and development in any other way than by intelligent design by a creator God. Intelligent design does not deny biological evolution as such; its most fundamental criticism of Darwinism is directed against its core belief that evolution has no goal. The Intelligent Design movement argues that standard Darwinism runs into significant explanatory difficulties, which can only be adequately resolved through the intentional creation of individual species. Its critics argue that these difficulties are overstated, or that they will in due course be resolved by future theoretical advances.

A fourth option, which goes back to the appearance of Darwin's pioneering work, is to see creation as referring to an ongoing process, not a one-off event. God initiates a process which leads eventually to the emergence of humanity. This position is often referred to as "theistic evolution." Its representatives include the Victorian novelist and theologian Charles Kingsley (1819–75), who insisted that the most distinctive aspect of the Christian doctrine of creation was that God made things to make themselves. In 1884, Frederick Temple (1820–1902), who later became Archbishop of Canterbury, argued that God did something rather more splendid than just make the world; he makes the world *make itself*.

This debate has become particularly important in North America in recent years, due to pressure from conservative Christian pastors and organizations who believe that creationist accounts of the origins of humanity ought to be taught alongside Darwinian accounts in American public schools. This represents an important example of a theological debate with political consequences. Yet whatever the outcome of this particular controversy might be, the debate reminds us

that the seemingly simple verb "create" may be more complex than at first meets the eye.

Engaging with a text

We have already noted John Calvin's strong affirmation of a natural knowledge of God. This gave a significant stimulus to the development of the concept of natural theology on the part of his followers within the Reformed tradition. A good example of this is found in the Gallic Confession (1559), a Calvinist statement of faith which declared that God was revealed to humanity in two quite distinct manners: "First, in [God's] works, both in their creation and their preservation and control. Second, and more clearly, in his Word, which was revealed through oracles in the beginning, and which was subsequently committed to writing in the books which we call the Holy Scriptures."

A related idea was set out in the Belgic Confession of 1561. This expanded the brief statement on natural theology found in the Gallic Confession. Once more, knowledge of God is affirmed to come about by two means: through nature and through scripture.

> We know [God] in two manners. First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe, which is before our eyes as a most beautiful book, in which all creatures, great and small, are like so many characters leading us to contemplate the invisible things of God, namely, his eternal power and Godhead, as the Apostle Paul declares (Romans 1:20). All of these things are sufficient to convince humanity, and leave them without excuse. Second, he makes himself known more clearly and fully to us by his holy and divine Word; that is to say, as far as is necessary for us to know in this life, to his glory and our salvation.

This brief statement proved to be of considerable importance to the development of both the biological and physical sciences in the Lowlands. The development of the microscope at the end of the seventeenth century by Anton van Leeuwenhoek (1632–1723), a Dutch clockmaker, can be seen as an attempt to inspect the "little book" of nature in more detail, and hence to appreciate to a greater extent the wisdom of God in creation.

To help you interact with this text, either on your own or in group discussion, you might like to use the following framework.

1. Look up Romans 1:20, the text that plays such an important role in this document. Read it in its original context, beginning at verse 18. What point does Paul make here? How is this developed within the Belgic Confession?
2. What understanding of the relation of natural and revealed knowledge of God is set out in the document itself?
3. Might this encourage its readers to want to study nature in greater depth? And if so, for what reasons? And how might this relate to the historical observation that the natural sciences seem to have flourished in this region of Europe?

In this chapter, we have explored some basic aspects of the theology of creation, expanding the previous chapter's reflections on the nature of God. We now turn to consider the area of theology that focuses on Jesus Christ, the central figure of the Christian faith. In the next two chapters, we shall consider Christian understandings of the person of Christ (an area of theology usually referred to as "Christology") and the work of Christ (often referred to as "soteriology").

CHAPTER 4

Jesus

One of the most basic tasks of Christian theology is to clarify the identity and significance of Jesus Christ, the central figure of Christian faith. Christians have always insisted that there was something special, something qualitatively different about Jesus which sets him apart from other religious teachers or thinkers. But what exactly is it that is special about him? This question is addressed in the area of Christian theology traditionally known as *Christology*. If theology can be understood as "trying to make sense of God," then Christology is about "trying to make sense of Jesus Christ." A related term of importance is "soteriology" (from the Greek word *soteria*, "salvation"), meaning "making sense of salvation."

Christian theology aims to weave together the various elements of the biblical witness to the identity and significance of Jesus. The various biblical motifs that need to be integrated in this way include:

1. The terms that the New Testament uses to refer to Jesus.
2. What Jesus is understood to have achieved, which is understood to be directly related to his identity. There is a close link between the Christian understanding of the *person* of Christ and the *work* of Christ. In other words, discussion of the *identity* of Christ is interlocked with discussion of the *achievement* of Christ. We shall explore this issue further when reflecting on salvation in chapter 5.
3. The impact that Jesus made upon people during his ministry – for example, through his ministry of healing.

4. The resurrection, which New Testament writers interpret as an endorsement and validation of Jesus's exalted status in relation to God. Thus for Paul, the resurrection demonstrates that Jesus is the Son of God (Romans 1:3–4).

The limited space available for our discussion means that we cannot hope to explore all of these properly. However, we can at least begin to open up this fascinating area of Christian theology. To start with, we shall reflect on some titles used to refer to Jesus by New Testament writers, and their implications for his identity.

Jesus as Messiah

The title "Christ" or "Messiah" is widely used to designate Jesus in the New Testament. These two words refer to the same idea, the former being the Greek version, the latter the Hebrew. (Both the Greek and Hebrew words are mentioned together in John 1:41.) When Peter recognized Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16), he was identifying Jesus with the long-awaited Messiah. It is very easy for a modern western reader to assume that "Christ" was simply Jesus's surname, and to fail to appreciate that it is actually a title – "Jesus the Christ."

The term "Messiah" literally means "the anointed one" – someone who has been anointed with oil. This Old Testament practice indicated that the person anointed in this way was regarded as having been singled out by God as having special powers and functions. Thus a king was often referred to as "the Lord's anointed" (1 Samuel 24:6). The basic sense of the word could be said to be "the divinely appointed King of Israel." As time passed, the term gradually came to refer to a deliverer, himself a descendant of David, who would restore Israel to the golden age the nation had enjoyed under the rule of David.

During the period of Jesus's ministry, Palestine was occupied and administered by Rome. There was fierce nationalist feeling at the time, fueled by intense resentment at the presence of a foreign occupying power, and this appears to have given a new force to the traditional expectation of the coming of the Messiah. For many, the Messiah would be the deliverer who expelled the Romans from Israel, and restored the royal line of David. It is clear that Jesus refused to see himself as Messiah

in this sense of the term. At no point in his ministry do we find any violence against Rome suggested or condoned, nor even an explicit attack on the Roman administration. Jesus's criticisms are directed primarily against the failings of his own people. Thus after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:8–11), which gives every indication of being a deliberate messianic demonstration or gesture, Jesus immediately evicts the merchants from the temple (Matthew 21:12–13).

Jesus does not appear to have been prepared to accept the title "Messiah" in the course of his ministry. Mark's gospel should be read carefully to note this point. When Peter acclaims Jesus as Messiah – "You are the Christ!" – Jesus immediately tells him to keep quiet about it (Mark 8:29–30). It is not clear what the full significance of the "messianic secret" is. Why should Mark emphasize that Jesus did not make an explicit claim to be the Messiah, when he was so clearly regarded as such by so many?

Perhaps the answer may be found later in Mark's gospel, when he recounts the only point at which Jesus explicitly acknowledges his identity as the Messiah. When Jesus is led, as a prisoner, before the High Priest, he admits to being the Messiah (Mark 14:61–2). Once violent or political action of any sort is no longer possible, Jesus reveals his identity. He was indeed the deliverer of the people of God – but not, it would seem, in any political sense of the term. The misunderstandings associated with the term, particularly in radical Jewish nationalist circles, appear to have caused Jesus to play down the messianic side of his mission.

Jews did not expect their Messiah to be executed as a common criminal. It is worth noting that, immediately after Peter acknowledges Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus begins to explain to his disciples that he must suffer, be rejected by his own people, and be killed (Mark 8:29–31) – hardly an auspicious end to a messianic career. Paul made it clear to the Corinthian Christians that the very idea of "a crucified Messiah" (or "a crucified Christ") was scandalous to a Jew (1 Corinthians 1:23). From a very early stage, it is clear that Christians recognized a link between Jesus's messiahship and the destiny of the mysterious "Suffering Servant":

> He was despised, and rejected … A man of sorrows, acquainted with grief … He was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has

borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. Yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that made us whole. And with his stripes we are healed … The Lord has laid upon him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:3–6)

Jesus as Lord

A second title of Christological significance is "Lord" (Greek: *kyrios*). This term is used in two main senses in the New Testament. It is encountered as a polite title of respect, particularly when addressing someone. Thus when Martha speaks to Jesus, and addresses him as "Lord" (John 11:21), she is probably, although not necessarily, merely treating Jesus with proper respect.

Of infinitely greater importance, however, are the frequent passages in the New Testament in which Jesus is referred to as "the Lord." The confession that "Jesus is Lord" (Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 12:3) was clearly regarded by Paul as a statement of the essential feature of the gospel. Christians are those who "call upon the name of the Lord" (Romans 10:13; 1 Corinthians 1:2). But what is implied by this? It is clear that there was a tendency in first-century Palestinian Judaism to use the word "Lord" (Greek: *kyrios*; Aramaic: *mare*) to designate a divine being, or at the very least a figure who is decidedly more than just human, in addition to its function as a polite or honorific title. But of particular importance is the use of this Greek word *kyrios* to translate the four Hebrew letters used to refer to God in the Old Testament (often referred to as the "Tetragrammaton," from the Greek words for "four" and "letters"). As this point is important, we need to explore it in more detail.

The Old Testament writers were reluctant to refer to God directly, apparently regarding this as compromising his transcendence. On occasions where it was necessary to make reference to God, they tended to use a "cypher" of four letters, sometimes transliterated into English as YHWH. This group of letters, which lies behind the King James Version references to God as "Jehovah," and the Jerusalem Bible's references to God as "Yahweh," was used to represent the sacred name of God. Other Hebrew words could be used to refer to gods in general; this name was used to refer only to the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and

Jacob." YHWH acts as a proper name for the covenant God of Israel. This name is specific to God, almost acting as a proper name, and is never used to refer to any other divine or angelic being, unlike other Hebrew words for "god."

When the Old Testament was translated from Hebrew into Greek to give the famous translation known as the "Septuagint," the word *kyrios* was generally used to translate the sacred name of God. Of the 6,823 times that this name is used in the Hebrew, the Greek word *kyrios* ("Lord") is used to translate it on 6,156 occasions. This Greek word thus came to be an accepted way of referring directly and specifically to the God who had revealed himself to Israel at Sinai, and who had entered into a covenant with his people on that occasion. Jews would not use this term to refer to anyone or anything else. To do so would be to imply that this person or thing was of divine status. The historian Josephus tells us that the Jews refused to call the Roman emperor *kyrios*, because they regarded this name as reserved for God alone.

Yet the writers of the New Testament had no hesitation in using this sacred name to refer to Jesus, with all that this implied. A name which was used exclusively to refer to God was regarded as referring equally to Jesus. This was not some error made by ill-informed writers, ignorant of the Jewish background to the name. After all, the first disciples were Jews. Those New Testament writers, such as Paul, who make most use of the term "Lord" to refer to Jesus were perfectly well aware of its implications. Yet they regarded the evidence concerning Jesus, especially his resurrection from the dead, as compelling them to make this statement concerning his identity. It was a deliberate, considered, informed, and justified decision, which is entirely appropriate in the light of the history of Jesus. He has been raised to glory and majesty, and sits at the right hand of God. He therefore shares the same status as God and is to be addressed accordingly.

Jesus as Son of God

A further title used by the New Testament to refer to Jesus is "Son of God." In the Old Testament, the term is occasionally used to refer to angelic or supernatural persons (see Psalm 8:6; Job 38:7; Daniel 3:25). Messianic texts in the Old Testament refer to the coming Messiah as

the "Son of God" (2 Samuel 7:12–14; Psalms 2:7; 86:26–7). The New Testament use of the term seems to mark a development of its Old Testament meaning, with an increased emphasis upon its exclusiveness.

Although all people are children of God in some sense of the word, the New Testament holds that Jesus is *the* Son of God. Paul distinguishes between Jesus as the natural Son of God, and believers as adopted sons. Their relation to God is quite different from Jesus's relationship to him, even though both may be referred to as "sons of God." We shall explore this point further when we consider the idea of "adoption" as a way of thinking about the benefits which Christ obtained for us on the cross. Similarly, in the first letter of John, Jesus is referred to as "the Son," while believers are designated as "children." There is something quite distinct about Jesus's relation to God, as expressed in the title "Son of God."

The New Testament understanding of Jesus's relationship to God, expressed in the Father–Son relationship, takes a number of forms. First, we note that Jesus directly addresses God as "Father," using the Aramaic word "Abba," often thought to reflect a particularly close relationship (Mark 14:36; see also Matthew 6:9; 11:25–6; 26:42; Luke 23:34, 46). Secondly, it is clear from a number of passages that the evangelists regard Jesus as the Son of God, or that Jesus treats God as his father, even if this is not stated explicitly (Mark 1:11; 9:7; 12:6; 13:32; 14:61–2; 15:39). Thirdly, John's gospel is permeated with the Father–Son relationship (note especially passages such as John 5:16–27; 17:1–26), with a remarkable emphasis upon the identity of will and purpose of the Father and Son, indicating how close the relationship between Jesus and God was understood to be by the first Christians. At every level in the New Testament – in the words of Jesus himself, or in the impression which was created among the first Christians – Jesus is clearly understood to have a unique and intimate relationship to God, which the resurrection demonstrated publicly (Romans 1:3–4).

Jesus as Son of Man

For many Christians, the term "Son of Man" stands as a natural counterpart to "Son of God." It is seen as an affirmation of the humanity of Christ, just as the latter term is a complementary affirmation of his divinity. However, it is not quite as simple as this. The term "Son of

Man" (Hebrew *ben adam* or Aramaic *bar nasha*) is used in three main contexts in the Old Testament:

1. As a form of address to the prophet Ezekiel.
2. To refer to a future eschatological figure (Daniel 7:13–14), whose coming signals the end of history and the coming of divine judgment.
3. To emphasize the contrast between the lowliness and frailty of human nature and the elevated status or permanence of God and the angels (Numbers 23:19; Psalm 8:14).

The third such meaning relates naturally to the humanity of Jesus, and may underlie at least some of its references in the synoptic gospels. It is, however, the second use of the term which has attracted most scholarly attention.

The German New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann argued that Daniel 7:13–14 pointed to the expectation of the coming of a "Son of Man" at the end of history, and argued that Jesus shared this expectation. References by Jesus to "the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory" (Mark 13:26) are thus, according to Bultmann, to be understood to refer to a figure *other than* Jesus. Bultmann suggested that the early church subsequently merged "Jesus" and "Son of Man," understanding them to be the one and the same. The early church thus invented the application of the term to Jesus.

This view has not, however, commanded universal assent. Other scholars have argued that the term "Son of Man" carries a range of associations, including suffering, vindication, and judgment, thus making it natural and proper to apply it to Jesus. George Caird is one New Testament scholar to develop such an approach, arguing that Jesus used the term "to indicate his essential unity with mankind, and above all with the weak and humble, and also his special function as predestined representative of the new Israel and bearer of God's judgment and kingdom."

Jesus as God

Finally, we need to consider a group of New Testament texts which make the most important and exciting assertion of all: that Jesus is none other than God. All the other material we have considered in

this chapter can be seen as pointing to this conclusion. The affirmation that Jesus is divine is the climax of the New Testament witness to the person of Jesus Christ. At least ten texts in the New Testament seem to speak explicitly of Jesus in this way (John 1:1; 1:18; 20:28; Romans 9:5; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 1:8–9; 2 Peter 1:1; 1 John 5:20). Others point in this direction, implying (though not explicitly stating) much the same conclusion (such as Matthew 1:23; John 17:3; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 5:5; Colossians 2:2; 2 Thessalonians 1:12; and 1 Timothy 3:16).

We could continue this examination of the various titles which the New Testament employs to refer to Jesus, to illustrate the many facets of its complex witness to his identity and significance. There is, however, a danger that, by doing this, we may miss seeing the wood for the trees. In other words, we will fail to see that these titles, together with the New Testament accounts of the impact Christ had upon those whom he encountered, build up to give a pattern. It is clear that the New Testament witnesses to Jesus as the embodiment of all God's promises, witnessed to in the Old Testament, brought to fulfillment and fruition.

The statements made about Jesus may be broadly listed under two classes. First, we have statements about Jesus's *function* – what God has done for us in Jesus. Second, we have statements about Jesus's *identity* – who Jesus is. The two are, of course, closely connected. His achievements are grounded in his identity; his identity is demonstrated in his achievements. As the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle build up to give a pattern, which no single piece can show on its own, so the New Testament "Christological titles" build up to give an overall picture, which no single title can adequately disclose. Taken collectively, they build up into a rich, deep, and powerfully persuasive portrait of Christ as the divine Savior and Lord, who continues to exercise an enormous influence over, and appeal to, sinful and mortal human beings.

Functional statements about Jesus

In addition to a wide range of New Testament statements concerning the *identity* of Jesus, there are several important passages which speak of the significance of Jesus in *functional* terms – that is to say, in terms

which identify him as performing certain functions or tasks associated with God. Three groups of texts are of particular importance, as they identify the function of Jesus in terms which have clear implications for his identity.

1. *Jesus is the savior of humanity*. The Old Testament affirmed that there was only one savior of humanity – God. Knowing that God alone was Savior, that it was God alone who could save, the first Christians nevertheless affirmed that Jesus Christ was also their Savior. This confession is thus theologically significant. As Athanasius of Alexandria (ca. 296–373) emphasized, no creature, no matter how great, can achieve salvation. If Jesus Christ has brought salvation to humanity, as the creed declares that he has, then he must be God. If Jesus Christ is something other than God – in other words, a creature – then whatever "salvation" he brings is not the same as that offered by God.

The symbol of a fish was widely used by early Christians. The five Greek letters spelling out the word "fish" in Greek (I–CH–TH–U–S) were the initial letters of the theological statement "Jesus Christ, Son
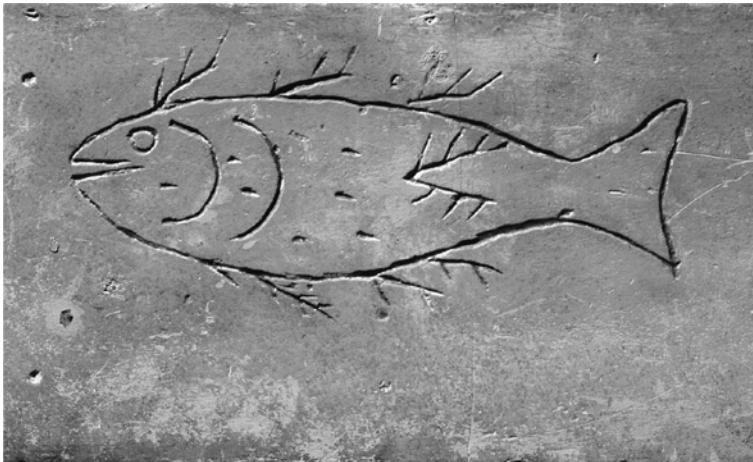

Figure 9   Image of a carving of a fish as an early Christian symbol, funerary graffito from Rome, second–third century AD. Museo della Civiltà Romana, Rome. © The Art Archive/Alamy.

of God, Savior." For the New Testament, Christ saves his people from their sins (Matthew 1:21); in his name alone is there salvation (Acts 4:12); he is the "captain of salvation" (Hebrews 2:10); he is the "Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11). And in these affirmations, and others, Jesus is understood to function as God, doing something which, properly speaking, only God can do.

2. *Jesus is worshipped*. Within the Jewish context in which the first Christians operated, it was God and God alone who was to be worshipped. Paul warned the Christians at Rome that there was a constant danger that humans would worship creatures, when they ought to be worshipping their creator (Romans 1:23). Yet the early Christian church worshipped Christ as God – a practice which is clearly reflected even in the New Testament. Thus 1 Corinthians 1:2 speaks of Christians as those who "call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ," using language which reflects the Old Testament formulas for worshipping or adoring God (such as Genesis 4:26; 13:4; Psalm 105:1; Jeremiah 10:25; Joel 2:32). Jesus is thus clearly understood to function as God, in that he is an object of worship.

3. *Jesus reveals God*. "Anyone who has seen me, has seen the Father" (John 14:9). These remarkable words, so characteristic of John's gospel, emphasize the belief that the Father speaks and acts in the Son – in other words, that God is revealed in and by Jesus Christ. To have seen Christ is to have seen the Father – in other words, Jesus is understood, once more, to function as God.

These three groups of passages clearly point to an understanding of Jesus which transcends the category of pure humanity. Yet neither the New Testament writers, nor Christian theology, understand this to entail that Jesus Christ is *not* a human being. For every biblical passage that explicitly affirms that Jesus was rather more than a human being, others can be brought forward that affirm that he was indeed a real human being. Jesus wept, suffered, became tired, and experienced human emotions.

One of the most fundamental tasks of Christian theology has been the clarification of the relationship between human and divine elements in the person of Jesus Christ. How can these both be maintained, without compromising each other? It is clear that the New Testament recognized that Jesus was a genuine human being who felt pain, who wept, and who knew what it was like to be hungry and thirsty. Yet this

insight, on its own, is not enough to do justice to the biblical portrait of Jesus.

In the second place, the New Testament insists that Jesus was far more than a human being. Without in any way denying the real humanity of Jesus, the New Testament declares him to be the "Son of God," "Lord," and so forth. It applies words to him which are reserved for God, and attributes actions to him which are the privilege of God alone. So how can these two insights be woven into a seamless fabric? How can both be affirmed, without contradicting the other? The riddle that Christian theology had to resolve is how these two elements could be held together meaningfully. How could theology locate the identify and significance of Jesus Christ on a conceptual map? How was it to place him along the coordinates of time and eternity, humanity and divinity, particularity and universality?

Early Christological models

So what way of picturing Jesus was best adapted to safeguard and enfold the complex witness of the New Testament to his impact on people? As the church wrestled with the question of the identity of Jesus of Nazareth, there was a dawning, painful recognition that it was going to be impossible to do full justice to his identity and significance. It would not be an easy process, not least because the idea of someone being both God and a human being seemed completely illogical and incoherent. A number of simple solutions were explored, only to be rejected, in the first period of Christian theologian reflection. We may briefly note three of these inadequate approaches.

Adoptionism maintained that Jesus was basically a human being who was anointed by the Holy Spirit like the prophets of the Old Testament, but to a greater extent. At his baptism by John the Baptist, Jesus was thus "adopted" by the Father and became God's Son. He was given a mission to preach the good news of the Kingdom, and empowered to work miracles. According to this view, Jesus belongs to the same lineage as all the prophets of the Old Testament – he was different in degree but not in kind. In one sense, this can be seen as the church taking an existing Jewish idea of category (a human being with a special endowment of the Spirit), and adapting it to help make

sense of Jesus of Nazareth. It did not take long to realize that it was inadequate.

Others preferred an approach which emphasized the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth, playing down his humanity. *Docetism* (deriving from the Greek verb *dokein*, "to appear") argued that Jesus Christ was completely divine, but appeared also to be human. Although really divine, Christ presented himself to humanity as one who shared their condition. Although historians are not entirely sure that Docetism was a coherent school of thought in the early church, there are certainly grounds for suggesting that it represented some kind of theological trend or tendency, which increasingly came to be seen as inadequate. As the church came to appreciate the importance of affirming Christ's humanity – not least because of the link it secured with human nature in general – docetism came to be seen as theologically simplistic.

Perhaps the most important of these inadequate approaches to the identity of Jesus was *Arianism*, an approach to Christology which derives its name from Arius (256–326), an Alexandrian writer of the fourth century. Arius held that Jesus Christ was not divine, but was supreme among God's creatures. A clear line could be drawn separating God and the creation. There were no alternatives, no "in-between" positions. And having insisted on this absolute divide, Arius declared that Jesus of Nazareth was to be located on the creaturely, not the divine, side of this dividing line. Biblical passages that seemed to attribute divinity to Jesus were to be interpreted as honorific in intention.

His critics, including Athanasius, argued that Arius's interpretation of core biblical passages (especially some found in John's gospel) was faulty. Athanasius held that only God could recreate humanity in the "image of God" – and that could only happen if God became incarnate, in order that the root problems faced by humanity (mortality and sin) could be engaged directly.

The Word of God came in his own Person, because it was he alone, the Image of the Father, who could recreate humanity made after the Image. In order to effect this re-creation, however, he first had to eliminate death and corruption. Therefore he assumed a human body, in order that in it death might once for all be destroyed, and that humanity might be renewed according to the Image.

Athanasius suggested that Arius had made the whole gospel incoherent by making it impossible for Christ to be humanity's savior. Only God could save. But the New Testament was clear that Jesus was the savior of humanity. If Jesus was not God, he could not save – and the gospel proclamation was thus inconsistent. Christian doctrines could not be isolated from each other and discussed on their own. They were like a web, with each strand connected to and supporting others.

Again, Athanasius pointed out that Christians worshipped Jesus. But if Jesus was not God, this made them guilty of idolatry – worshipping something that was not God. Athanasius thus argued that Arius's attempt to make sense of Jesus of Nazareth was deeply flawed, failing to do justice either to the biblical witness to Jesus or to the church's actual experience of their Lord and Savior. In the end, these considerations proved compelling, and brought about a crystallization of core Christological insights at the Council of Chalcedon in the fifth century.

The Council of Chalcedon

The Council of Chalcedon (451) was a landmark in Christian theology, bringing a long period of exploration and reflection to a close with its definitive resolution of centuries of discussion. The term "Chalcedonian Definition" is used to refer to the Council's firm affirmation of the "two natures" of Jesus Christ, as "truly God and truly human:"

> We all with one voice confess our Lord Jesus Christ to be one and the same Son, perfect in divinity and humanity, truly God and truly human, consisting of a rational soul and a body, being of one substance with the Father in relation to his divinity, and being of one substance with us in relation to his humanity, and is like us in all things apart from sin (Hebrews 4:15).

Chalcedon allowed a generous degree of diversity on how this concept of the "two natures" of Christ was to be understood. Provided that it was recognized that Jesus Christ is both truly divine and truly human, the precise manner in which this is articulated or explored was not of fundamental importance. In part, Chalcedon's decision to insist upon

the two natures of Christ, while accepting a plurality of interpretations regarding their relation, reflects the political situation of the period. At a time in which there was considerable disagreement within the church over the most reliable way of stating the "two natures of Christ," the Council was obliged to adopt a realistic approach, and give its weight to whatever consensus it could find. That consensus concerned the recognition that Christ was both divine and human, but *not* how the divine and human natures related to each other.

The Christian doctrine of the person of Jesus Christ is often discussed using the category of "incarnation." "Incarnation" is a difficult yet important word, deriving from the Latin term for "flesh," summarizing and affirming the basic Christian belief that Jesus Christ is both divine and human. The idea of the incarnation is the climax of Christian reflection upon the mystery of Christ – the recognition that Jesus Christ reveals God; that he represents God; that he speaks and acts as God and for God. In short, we must learn to "think about Jesus as we do about God" (2 Clement 1:12). The crucial step which underlies all Christian thinking on the incarnation is to argue that, as Jesus Christ acts as God and for God in every context of importance, we are entitled to conclude that he is God. His function discloses his identity; his identity determines his function.

The incarnation and icons

One of the most interesting theological debates of the later patristic period took place in the eastern church, and concerned the place of icons in Christian worship and devotion. An "icon" (Greek: *eikon*, "an image") is a religious painting or picture which is understood to act as a window through which the worshipper may catch a closer glimpse of the divine than would otherwise be possible. This practice was regarded with severe disapproval by some, who thought that the use of such images in worship was tantamount to idolatry – something that was explicitly forbidden by the Ten Commandments. A faction known as the "iconoclasts" (from the Greek words for "breaking images") wanted to eliminate icons altogether. To portray God in an image was to imply that God could be described or defined – and that was to imply an unthinkable limitation on the part of God.

Yet many writers of this age defended the use of icons on explicitly theological grounds – above all, the doctrine of the incarnation. Germanus, Patriarch of Constantinople (died ca. 733), argued vigorously for the use of icons in public worship and private devotion on the basis of the following incarnational argument. "I represent God, the invisible one, not as invisible, but in so far as God has become visible for us by participation in flesh and blood." Yet the most interesting theological argument in defense of icons is due to the theologian John of Damascus (ca. 675–ca. 749), held in particular respect within the Orthodox tradition.

In a series of three treatises aimed against those who reject the use of icons, originally written in Greek in the first half of the eighth century, John of Damascus argued that the theological fact of the incarnation of Christ provides a solid foundation for the use of icons in devotion. John uses a strongly incarnational approach to defend the use of physical items – including icons – in worship and adoration. Exactly what is wrong, he asked, with using physical materials to depict or convey the spiritual? Bibles use paper and ink – which are, after all, material substances – to convey divine truth. Jesus Christ died on a wooden cross to save the world, so that material objects were implicated in the salvation of the world. And what about the incarnation? Was that not about the word becoming flesh – about the immaterial assuming materiality? And what about the bread and wine in the eucharist? They were material objects, yet capable of mediating spiritual realities. So it is with icons.

Yet John has another theological card to play, again involving the incarnation. The incarnation both legitimates the use of material objects as devotional aids, and allows us to depict God. Before the coming of Christ, this was impossible. Since Christ is the "image [Greek: *eikon*] of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15), icons may be used to represent him. As John put it:

> [Before the incarnation] there was absolutely no way in which God, who has neither a body nor a face, could be represented by any image. But now that he has made himself visible in the flesh and has lived with people, I can make an image of what I have seen of God. I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator of matter, who became matter for my sake, and who worked out my salvation through matter.

Jesus as mediator

So how are we to conceive the identity of Christ? What models or analogies may be helpful as we try to visualize the place of Jesus Christ on the map of divine and human possibilities? In this section, we shall explore one New Testament title for Christ which is relatively easy to grasp, and consider its implications. The New Testament refers to Christ as a *mediator* between God and humanity at several points (Hebrews 9:15; 1 Timothy 2:5). Christ is here understood to mediate between a transcendent God and fallen humanity.

So what is mediated? Two basic complementary answers are given within the New Testament, and the long tradition of Christian theological engagement with scripture: *revelation* and *salvation*. Christ mediates both *knowledge of God* and *fellowship with God*.

The "Logos-Christology" of Justin Martyr and other early patristic writers is an excellent instance of the notion of the mediation of knowledge of God through Christ. The Logos – a Greek term which can be translated as "word," but which has richer associations of rationality and meaning – is understood as a mediating principle which bridges the gap between a transcendent God and the created order. Although present in a transient manner in the Old Testament prophets, the Logos becomes incarnate in Christ, and thus provides a point of mediation between God and humanity. A related approach is found in Emil Brunner's *The Mediator* (1927), and in a more developed form in his 1938 work *Truth as Encounter*. In the latter, Brunner argued that faith was primarily an encounter with the God who meets us personally in Jesus Christ.

Other writers have stressed the importance of Christ as the one who mediates salvation. This approach can be seen in John Calvin's *Institutes* (1559). Christ is here seen as a unique channel or focus, through which God's redeeming work is directed toward and made available to humanity. Humanity, as originally created by God, was good in every respect. On account of the Fall, natural human gifts and faculties have been radically impaired. As a consequence, both the human reason and human will are contaminated by sin. Unbelief is thus seen as an act of will as much as of reason; it is not simply a failure to discern the hand of God within the created order, but a deliberate decision *not* to discern it and *not* to obey God.

Calvin develops the consequences of this at two distinct, although clearly related, levels. At the revelational level, humans lack the necessary rational and volitional resources to discern God fully within the created order. There are obvious parallels here with the Logos-Christology of Justin Martyr. At the soteriological level, humans lack what is required in order to be saved; they do not *want* to be saved (on account of the debilitation of the mind and will through sin), and they are *incapable* of saving themselves (in that salvation presupposes obedience to God, now impossible on account of sin). True knowledge of God and salvation must both therefore come from outside the human situation. In such a manner, Calvin lays the foundations for his doctrine of the mediatorship of Jesus Christ.

Figure 10
Engraved portrait of John Calvin (1509–64), author of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. © Fred de Noyelle/ Godong/Corbis.

Calvin's analysis of the knowledge of God and of human sin lays the foundation for his Christology. Jesus Christ is the mediator between God and humanity. In order to act as such a mediator, Jesus Christ must be both divine and human. In that it was impossible for us to ascend to God, on account of our sin, God chose to descend to us instead. Unless Jesus Christ was himself a human being, other human beings could not benefit from his presence or activity. "The Son of God became the Son of Man, and received what is ours in such a way that he transferred to us what is his, making that which is his by nature to become ours through grace."

Calvin's stress upon the mediatorial presence of God in Christ leads him to insist upon a close connection between the person and the work of Christ. Drawing on a tradition going back to Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 260–ca. 340), Calvin argues that Christ's work may be summarized under three offices or ministries (often referred to using the Latin phase *munus triplex Christi*) – prophet, priest, and king. The basic argument is that Jesus Christ brings together in his person the three great mediatorial offices of the Old Testament. In his *prophetic* office, Christ is the herald and witness of God's grace. He is a teacher
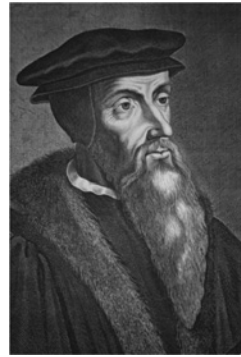
endowed with divine wisdom and authority. In his *kingly* office, Christ has inaugurated a kingship which is heavenly, not earthly; spiritual, not physical. This kingship is exercised over believers through the action of the Holy Spirit. Finally, through his *priestly* office, Christ is able to reinstate us within the divine favor, through offering his death as a satisfaction for our sin. In all these respects, Christ brings to fulfillment the mediatorial ministries of the Old Covenant, allowing them to be seen in a new and clearer light as they find their fulfillment in his mediatorship.

The debate about the "Historical Jesus"

We now turn to consider a major debate about Christology which arose in the "Age of Reason." The rationalist assumptions of this era created suspicion about any idea of a specific human being having privileged insights or status. Rationalist writers argued that Jesus of Nazareth had been misunderstood by the early church. It was necessary to go behind both Christian tradition and the New Testament, and uncover a simpler, more plausible view of Jesus Christ, consistent with the values of the "Age of Reason." As a result, the movement that we now know as the "Quest for the Historical Jesus" got under way in the late eighteenth century.

The original quest of the historical Jesus was based upon the pre-supposition that there was a radical gulf between the historical figure of Jesus and the interpretation which the Christian church had placed upon him. The "historical Jesus" who lies behind the New Testament was a simple religious teacher; the "Christ of faith" was a misrepresentation of this simple figure by early church writers. By going back to the historical Jesus, a more credible version of Christianity would result, stripped of all unnecessary and inappropriate dogmatic additions (such as the idea of the resurrection or the divinity of Christ).

A major criticism of this "Quest for the Historical Jesus" was mounted by the theologian Martin Kähler (1835–1912), who challenged the theological significance of the reconstruction of the historical Jesus. Kähler argued that the "historical Jesus" was an irrelevance to faith, in that this faith was based upon the "Christ of faith." Kähler rightly saw that the dispassionate and provisional Jesus of the academic

historian cannot become the object of faith. Yet how can Jesus Christ be the authentic basis and content of Christian faith, when historical science can never establish certain knowledge concerning the historical Jesus? How can faith be based upon a historical event without being vulnerable to the charge of historical relativism? Kähler addressed these questions in his *The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ* (1892).

For Kähler, Christ must be regarded as a "suprahistorical" rather than a "historical" figure, so that the critical–historical method cannot be applied in his case. The critical–historical method could not deal with the suprahistorical (and hence suprahuman) characteristics of Jesus, and hence was obliged to ignore or deny them. In effect, the critical–historical method could only lead to an Arian Christology, on account of its core dogmatic presuppositions.

In the late twentieth century, a new kind of quest for the historical Jesus got under way, with a particular interest in exploring the relation between Jesus and his environment in first-century Judaism. This development, which is especially associated with Geza Vermes (1924–2013) and E. P. Sanders (born 1937), renewed interest in the Jewish background to Jesus, and further emphasized the importance of history in relation to Christology.

Sanders argued that Jesus was to be seen as a prophetic figure who was concerned with the restoration of the Jewish people. In works such as *Jesus and Judaism* (1985) and *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (1993), Sanders suggested that Jesus envisaged an eschatological restoration of Israel. God would bring the present age to an end and usher in a new order focusing on a new temple, with Jesus himself acting as God's representative.

A particularly important contribution to this debate came from the British New Testament scholar N. T. Wright (born 1948), in his series *Christian Origins and the Question of God*. Wright here offers a critical appropriation of the approach of E. P. Sanders, while retaining the idea that the coming of Jesus Christ introduces something radically new, especially in relation to the identity of the people of God. The first two volumes in this series – *The New Testament and the People of God* (1992) and *Jesus and the Victory of God* (1996) – are widely regarded as among the most significant recent writings in the field of New Testament studies.

Engaging with a text

The English writer Dorothy L. Sayers (1893–1957) is perhaps best known for her crime novels, which introduced the world to Lord Peter Wimsey, an amateur aristocratic sleuth. However, she also developed a considerable interest in Christian theology, as many of her writings make clear. One of these takes the form of a lecture given in 1940, during the Second World War, on the importance of the creeds. Sayers offered an important and penetrating analysis of the relation of the divinity and humanity of Christ in this lecture, which was later published in a collection entitled *Creed or Chaos?* (1947).

Sayers's basic theme in this lecture is that it is not good enough to agree that Jesus had some useful ideas, unless we have good reasons for asserting that there is something distinctive about Jesus which requires us to take those ideas with compelling seriousness. Hence, Sayers argues, the great questions of Christology are inevitable, and must be addressed. Using the rise of Nazism in Germany under Adolf Hitler during the 1930s as an example, she argues that claims to moral or cultural authority must be grounded in something intrinsic to the person of Christ. Otherwise, Christ will be judged by moral and cultural principles, instead of judging them by acting as their foundation and criterion.

> It is quite useless to say that it doesn't matter particularly who or what Christ was or by what authority He did those things, and that even if He was only a man, He was a very nice man and we ought to live by His principles: for that is merely Humanism, and if the "average man" in Germany chooses to think that Hitler is a nicer sort of man with still more attractive principles, the Christian Humanist has no answer to make … The central dogma of the Incarnation is that by which relevance stands or falls. If Christ was only man, then He is entirely irrelevant to any thought about God; if He is only God, then He is entirely irrelevant to any experience of human life …

Teachers and preachers never, I think, make it sufficiently clear that dogmas are not a set of arbitrary regulations invented *a priori* by a committee of theologians enjoying a bout of all-in dialectical wrestling. Most of them were hammered out under pressure of urgent practical necessity to provide an answer to heresy.

You may find the following questions helpful in interacting with this text, either on your own or in a group discussion.

1. Read through the opening paragraph. What point does Sayers make here? What is her fundamental criticism of "Christian Humanism"? How does she understand the question of the *identity* of Christ to shape our thinking on his relevance to life?
2. Consider this citation: "If Christ was only man, then He is entirely irrelevant to any thought about God; if He is only God, then He is entirely irrelevant to any experience of human life." Locate this statement within the text. How does Sayers arrive at this conclusion? And how does she further develop the ideas contained in it?
3. Read through the concluding section of the extract. Some argue that doctrines about Jesus – for example, that he is both divine and human – just make a simple gospel unnecessarily complicated. What do you think Sayers might say in response to such objections?

In this brief chapter, we focused on some aspects of the Christian understanding of the identity of Jesus Christ. Yet there is much more that needs to be said, especially in relation to the way in which Christians understand the death of Christ to be the basis of salvation. We shall consider this matter in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

Salvation

A central theme of the Christian message is that the human situation has, in some way, been transformed by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is often described as "salvation." Although the word "salvation" has a very specific meaning within Christian theology, as we shall see in a moment, it is often used in a more general sense in everyday use.

It is important to appreciate that the term "salvation" does not necessarily have any specifically *Christian* reference. It can be used in a thoroughly secular manner. For example, it was common for Soviet writers, especially during the late 1920s, to speak of Lenin as the "savior" of the Russian people. Military coups in African states during the 1980s frequently resulted in the setting up of "councils of salvation," which would try to restore political and economic stability. Salvation can thus be a purely secular notion, concerned with political emancipation or the general human quest for liberation.

Even at the religious level, salvation is not a specifically Christian idea. Many – but not, it must be stressed, all – of the world's religions have concepts of salvation. They differ enormously, in relation to both their understanding of how that salvation is achieved, and the shape or form which it is understood to take.

In turning to explore the theology of salvation, we need to engage with two questions. First, there is the question of how "salvation" itself is to be understood. In what way is the Christian understanding of the nature of salvation *distinctive*? Second, there is the question of how

Theology: The Basics, Fourth Edition. Alister E. McGrath.
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salvation is possible, and in particular how it is grounded in the history of Jesus Christ. Or, to put this another way: what is the basis of salvation, according to Christianity? Both these questions have been the subject of intense discussion throughout Christian history, and we shall briefly consider some themes to emerge from this debate in what follows.

We begin by considering the first of these questions: what *is* salvation? One way of beginning a discussion of this issue is to look at some images of salvation used in Paul's letters.

Pauline images of salvation

Throughout his New Testament letters, Paul uses a rich range of images to illuminate and clarify what benefits the death and resurrection of Christ secures for believers. He clearly assumes that his readers are familiar with both the cultic rites of Judaism and some contemporary cultural practices within the Roman empire – such as the "redemption" of those who have sold themselves into slavery – and will thus be able to grasp what these analogies were meant to convey. In what follows, we shall explore some of these, and try to appreciate their importance.

The first image is that of *salvation* itself. Paul sees salvation as having past (e.g., Romans 8:24), present (e.g., 1 Corinthians 1:18), and future (e.g., Romans 13:11) dimensions. The word "salvation" thus refers to something that has already happened in the past, to something that is happening in the present, and to something that will happen in the future. The Greek word *soteria* has a number of meanings going beyond the conventional translation "salvation," including "liberation" and "healing" – as in being released from danger or captivity, or being delivered from some form of fatal illness. Augustine of Hippo suggested that the church was like a hospital, in that it was full of people who were in the process of being healed.

A second image of importance is that of *adoption*. At several points, Paul speaks of Christians as having been "adopted" into the family of God (Romans 8:15, 23; Galatians 4:5). It is widely thought that Paul is here drawing on a legal practice, common in Roman culture (yet,

interestingly, not recognized within traditional Jewish law), by which a family could adopt a male child and thus secure inheritance rights. According to many interpreters of Paul, to speak of "believers" having been adopted into the family of God is to make the point that believers share the same inheritance rights as Jesus Christ, and will hence receive the glory which Christ achieved (although only after first sharing in his sufferings).

At the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, many came to place particular importance on the image of *justification*. Especially in those letters dealing with the relation of Christianity to Judaism (such as Galatians and Romans), Paul affirms that believers have been "justified through faith" (e.g., Romans 5:1–2). This is widely held to involve a change in a believer's legal status in the sight of God, and their ultimate assurance of acquittal before God, despite their sinfulness. The term "justification" and the verb "to justify" thus came to signify "entering into a right relationship with God," or perhaps "being made righteous in the sight of God."

A fourth image is that of *redemption*. This term primarily bears the sense of "secure someone's release through a payment." In the ancient world, which acted as the backdrop to Paul's thought, the term could be used to refer to the liberation of prisoners of war, or to the securing of liberty of those who had sold themselves into slavery, often to pay off a family debt. Paul's basic idea appears to be that the death of Christ secures the freedom of believers from slavery to the law or to death, in order that they might become slaves of God instead (1 Corinthians 6:20; 7:23).

The problem of analogy: salvation as ransom

In chapter 2, we noted how the theological use of analogies raised some interesting questions. How far can these analogies be pressed? For example, in thinking of God as "father," are we implying that God is male? A similar issue arises in connection with thinking about salvation, and we shall explore the question by looking at the image of salvation as a "ransom."

The image of Christ's death as a ransom came to be of central importance to Greek patristic writers, such as Irenaeus of Lyons. The New

Testament speaks of Jesus giving his life as a "ransom" for sinners (Mark 10:45; 1 Timothy 2:6). So what are the implications of this image? The word "ransom" suggests three related ideas:

1. *Liberation*. A ransom is something which achieves freedom for a person who is held in captivity.
2. *Payment*. A ransom is a sum of money which is paid in order to achieve someone's liberation.
3. *Someone to whom the ransom is paid*. A ransom is usually paid to a person's captor.

There is no doubt that the New Testament proclaims that we have been liberated from captivity through the death and resurrection of Jesus. We have been set free from captivity to sin and the fear of death (Romans 8:21; Hebrews 2:15). It is also clear that the New Testament understands the death of Jesus as the price which had to be paid to achieve our liberation (1 Corinthians 6:20; 7:23). In both these respects, the scriptural use of "redemption" corresponds to the everyday use of the word. But what of the third aspect?

The New Testament nowhere suggests that Jesus's death was the price paid to someone (such as the devil) to achieve our liberation. Some patristic writers, however, assumed that they could press this analogy to its limits, and declared that God had delivered us from the power of the devil by offering him Jesus as the price of our liberation.

Origen (ca. 185–ca. 254), perhaps the most speculative of early patristic writers, was one such writer. If Christ's death was a ransom, Origen argued, it must have been paid to someone. But to whom? It could not have been paid to God, in that God was not holding sinners to ransom. Therefore, it had to be paid to the devil.

Gregory the Great (ca. 540–604) developed this idea still further. The devil had acquired rights over fallen humanity, which God was obliged to respect. The only means by which humanity could be released from this satanic domination and oppression was through the devil exceeding the limits of his authority, and thus being obliged to forfeit his rights. So how could this be achieved? Gregory suggests that it could come about if a sinless person were to enter the world, yet in the form of a normal sinful person. The devil would not notice until it was too late. In claiming authority over this sinless person, the devil

would have overstepped the limits of his authority, and thus be obliged to forfeit his rights.

Gregory uses the image of a baited hook, with Christ's humanity being the bait, and his divinity the hook. The devil, like a great sea-monster, snaps at the bait – and then discovers, too late, the hook. "The bait tempts in order that the hook may wound. Our Lord therefore, when coming for the redemption of humanity, made a kind of hook of himself for the death of the devil." Other writers explored other images for the same idea – that of trapping the devil. Christ's death was like a net for catching birds, or a trap for catching mice. It was this aspect of this approach to the meaning of the cross that caused the most disquiet subsequently. It seemed that God was guilty of deception.

This theme is probably best seen in the writings of Rufinus of Aquileia (ca. 345–410), particularly his exposition of the Apostles' Creed, which dates from around the year 400:

> [The purpose of the incarnation] was that the divine virtue of the Son of God might be like a kind of hook hidden beneath the form of human flesh … to lure on the prince of this world to a contest; that the Son might offer him his human flesh as a bait and that the divinity which lay underneath might catch him and hold him fast with its hook … Then, just as a fish when it seizes a baited hook not only fails to drag off the bait but is itself dragged out of the water to serve as food for others; so he that had the power of death seized the body of Jesus in death, unaware of the hook of divinity which lay hidden inside. Having swallowed it, he was immediately caught. The gates of hell were broken, and he was, as it were, drawn up from the pit, to become food for others.

The imagery of victory over the devil proved to have enormous popular appeal. The medieval idea of "the harrowing of hell" bears witness to its power. According to this, after dying upon the cross, Christ descended to hell, and broke down its gates in order that the imprisoned souls might go free. The idea rested (rather tenuously, it has to be said) upon 1 Peter 3:18–22, which makes reference to Christ "preaching to the spirits in prison."

The hymn "You Choirs of New Jerusalem," written by Fulbert of Chartres (died 1028), expresses this theme in several of its verses,

Figure 11   Albrecht Dürer's *The Harrowing of Hell*, 1510 (or Christ's Descent into Hell/Christ in Limbo), woodcut, 39.2 × 28 cm. AKG Images.

picking up the theme of Christ as the "lion of Judah" (Revelation 5:5) defeating Satan, the serpent (Genesis 3:15):

> For Judah's lion bursts his chains
> Crushing the serpent's head;
> And cries aloud through death's domain
> To wake the imprisoned dead.

A similar idea is found in *Piers the Plowman*, one of the most important English-language poems of the fourteenth century. In this poem, Piers falls asleep, and dreams of Christ throwing open the gates of Hell, and speaking the following words to Satan:

> Here is my soul as a ransom for all these sinful souls, to redeem those that are worthy. They are mine; they came from me, and therefore I have

the better claim on them … You, by falsehood and crime and against all justice, took away what was mine, in my own domain; I, in fairness, recover them by paying the ransom, and by no other means. What you got by guile is won back by grace … And as a tree caused Adam and all mankind to die, so my gallows-tree shall bring them back to life.

Having examined some biblical images of salvation, and reflected on some issues in their interpretation, we may now turn to consider how these themes have been explored and developed within the Christian theological tradition. This area of Christian theology is traditionally described as "theories of the atonement." The word "atonement" can be traced back to 1526, when the English writer William Tyndale (ca. 1494–1536) was confronted with the task of translating the New Testament into English. There was, at that time, no English word which meant "reconciliation." Tyndale thus had to invent such a word – "at-one-ment." This word soon came to bear the meaning "the bene-fits which Jesus Christ brings to believers through his death upon the cross." This unfamiliar word is rarely used in modern English, so that theologians now generally prefer to speak of this area as "the doctrine of the work of Christ."

In what follows, we shall look at three approaches to the cross which have played a significant role in Christian theology. Each builds on core New Testament themes, filling in part of the bigger picture of what redemption represents, and how it is secured in and through the death of Christ on the cross. None of them offers a complete understanding of the significance of the death and resurrection of Christ, but rather offers perspectives on the greater truth which underlies them all.

The cross as a sacrifice

In the first place, the New Testament draws on Old Testament cultic practices to present Christ's death upon the cross as a sacrifice. This approach, which is especially associated with the Letter to the Hebrews, presents Christ's sacrificial offering as an effective and perfect sacrifice, which was able to accomplish that which the sacrifices of the Old Testament were only able to intimate, rather than achieve. In particular, Paul's use of the Greek term *hilasterion*, often translated as "mercy seat"

(Romans 3:25), is also important here, as it is drawn from the Old Testament sacrificial rituals dealing with the purging of sin.

This idea is developed subsequently within the Christian tradition. In order for humanity to be restored to God, the mediator must sacrifice himself; without this sacrifice, such restoration is an impossibility. Athanasius argues that Christ's sacrifice was superior to those stipulated under the Old Covenant in several respects:

> Christ offers a sacrifice which is trustworthy, of permanent effect, and which is unfailing in its nature. The sacrifices which were offered according to the Law were not trustworthy, since they had to be offered every day, and were again in need of purification. In contrast, the Savior's sacrifice was offered once only, and was accomplished in its entirety, and can thus be relied upon permanently.

This idea is developed further in Athanasius's *Festal Letters*, written annually to celebrate the feast of Easter. In these letters, Athanasius develops the New Testament idea that there is an important analogy between the death of Christ on the cross and the sacrifice of a lamb during the Jewish festival of the Passover, commemorating Israel's deliverance from Egypt. Athanasius here interprets the Passover sacrifice of the lamb as a "type" (that is, a foreshadowing or anticipation) of the death of Christ:

> [Christ], being truly of God the Father, became incarnate for our sakes, so that he might offer himself to the Father in our place, and redeem us through his offering and sacrifice … This is he who, in former times, was sacrificed as a lamb, having been foreshadowed in that lamb. But afterwards, he was slain for us. "For Christ, our Passover, is sacrificed." (1 Corinthians 5:7).

Augustine of Hippo brought new clarity to the whole discussion of the nature of Christ's sacrifice through his crisp and highly influential definition of a sacrifice, set out in *City of God*: "A true sacrifice is offered in every action which is designed to unite us to God in a holy fellowship." On the basis of this definition, Augustine has no difficulties in speaking of Christ's death as a sacrifice: "By his death, which is indeed the one and most true sacrifice offered for us, he purged,

abolished, and extinguished whatever guilt there was by which the principalities and powers lawfully detained us to pay the penalty." In this sacrifice, Christ was both victim and priest; he offered himself up as a sacrifice: "He offered sacrifice for our sins. And where did he find that offering, the pure victim that he would offer? He offered himself, in that he could find no other."

This understanding of the sacrifice of Christ would become of decisive importance throughout the Middle Ages, and would shape western understandings of Christ's death. In view of Augustine's significance, we may cite in full the passage which is often singled out as the most succinct expression of his thoughts on this matter:

> Thus the true Mediator, who "took the form of a servant" and was thus made "the mediator between God and humanity, the person Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5), receives the sacrifice in the "form of God" (Philippians 2:7, 8), in union with the Father, with whom he is one God. And yet, in the "form of a servant," he determined to be himself that sacrifice, rather than to receive it, in order to prevent anyone from thinking that such a sacrifice should be offered to any creature. Thus he is both the priest, who made the offering himself, and the oblation.

Hugh of St. Victor (died 1142), writing in the early twelfth century, found the imagery of "sacrifice" helpful in explaining the inner logic of the workings of Christ's death on the cross. Christ was able to be an effective sacrifice for human sin precisely because he was able to bring our fallen sinful nature before God:

> From our nature, he took a victim for our nature, so that the whole burnt offering which was offered up might come from that which is ours. He did this so that the redemption to be offered might have a connection with us, through its being taken from what is ours. We are truly made to be partakers in this redemption as we are united through faith to the redeemer who has entered into fellowship with us through his flesh.

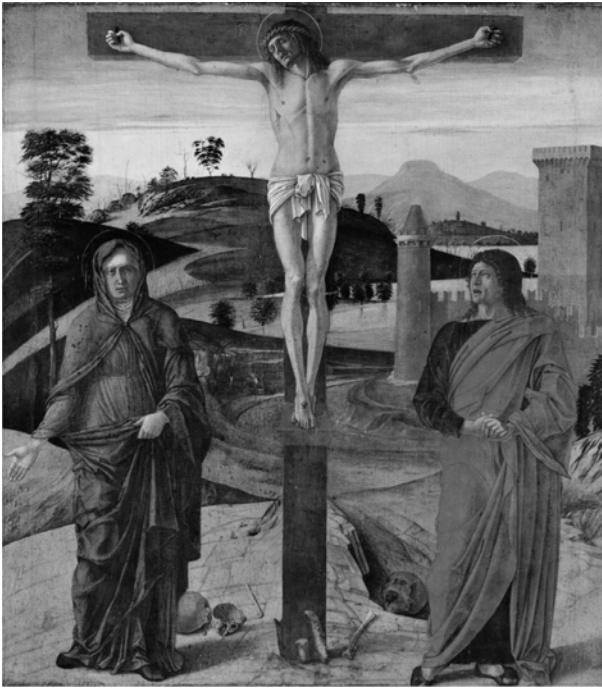The efficacy of Christ's sacrifice thus rested on his humanity, as well as his divinity.

Figure 12 Giovanni Bellini, *Crucifixion*, ca. 1470, wood, 71 × 63 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris. AKG Images/Erich Lessing.

The cross as a victory

A second way of approaching the meaning of the cross integrates a series of biblical passages focusing upon the notion of a divine victory over hostile forces. The New Testament declares that God has given us a victory through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. "Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:57). The early church gloried in the triumph of Christ upon the cross, and the victory that he won over sin, death, and Satan. But in what way may this victory be understood? Who is it who has been defeated? And how?

Christian writers of the first five centuries were deeply attracted by the imagery of Christ gaining a victory through the cross. It was clear to them that Christ had defeated death, sin, and the devil. Just as David

killed Goliath with his own weapons, so Christ defeated sin with its weapon – death. Through an apparent defeat, victory was gained over a host of hidden forces which tyrannized humanity.

Patristic writers such as Athanasius and Augustine of Hippo used a number of central images to explore the nature of human captivity to sin, and the manner in which we have been liberated by Christ's death and resurrection. We were held in bondage by the fear of death. We were imprisoned by sin. We were trapped by the power of the devil. With great skill, these writers built up a coherent picture of the human dilemma. Human beings are held prisoner by hostile forces, and are unable to break free unaided. Someone was required who would break into their prison, and set them free. Someone from outside the human situation would have to enter into our predicament, and liberate us. Someone would have to cut the bonds which held us captive. Time and time again, the same theme is restated: we are trapped in our situation, and our only hope lies in liberation from outside.

According to this approach, through his death and resurrection, Christ has confronted and disarmed the host of hostile forces which collectively held us in captivity. The cross and resurrection represent a dramatic act of divine liberation, in which God delivers his people from captivity to hostile powers, as he once delivered his people Israel from bondage in Egypt. The second-century writer Irenaeus of Lyons put it like this: "The Word of God was made flesh in order that he might destroy death and bring us to life. For we were tied and bound in sin, we were born in sin, and we live under the dominion of death."

This note of triumph led to the appropriation of an image drawn from Roman culture of the late classical period in Christian depictions of the benefits won by Christ on the cross. The victory of Christ was depicted as a great triumphant procession, comparable to those of ancient Rome, in which the great military achievements of its heroes were celebrated. In its classical form, the triumphal parade proceeded the victorious hero from the Campus Martius through the streets of Rome, finally ending up at the temple of Jupiter on the Capitoline Hill. The parade was led by the general's soldiers, often carrying placards with slogans describing the general and his achievements, or showing maps of the territories he conquered. Other soldiers led carts containing booty that would be turned over to Rome's treasury. A section of the parade included prisoners, often the leaders of the defeated cities or countries, bound in chains.

It was a small step for Christian writers to transform this imagery into the proclamation of Christ as the conquering hero. This powerful symbolism was firmly grounded in the New Testament, which spoke of the victorious Christ as "making captivity a captive" (Ephesians 4:8). While this theme can be seen in some Christian art of this early period, its most dramatic impact was upon the hymnody of the time. One of the greatest hymns of the Christian church, dating from this period, portrays Christ's triumphant procession and celebrates his defeat of his foes.

The hymn-writer Venantius Honorius Clementianus Fortunatus (ca. 530–ca. 610) is chiefly remembered for his poem "Vexilla regis prodeunt" – "the royal banners go forth." This hymn is still widely used today to mark Holy Week within western Christianity.

> The royal banners forward go,
> The cross shines forth in mystic glow;
> Where He in flesh, our flesh Who made,
> Our sentence bore, our ransom paid.

The cross and forgiveness

A third approach to the meaning of the death of Christ integrates a series of biblical passages dealing with notions of judgment and forgiveness. The understanding of the work of Christ outlined above has enormous attractions, not least on account of its highly dramatic character. It also, however, has some serious weaknesses. The eleventh-century writer Anselm of Canterbury identified two particular weaknesses with this approach. In the first place, it failed to explain why God should wish to redeem us. And, in the second, it was of little value in making sense of precisely how Jesus Christ was involved in the process of redemption. Anselm felt that more explanation was required, particularly in explaining how the divinity and humanity of Christ were involved in the redemption of humanity.

To meet this need, Anselm developed an approach to the work of Christ which centers upon the rectitude of the created order. God created the world in a certain way, which expresses the divine nature. God also created human beings in order that they might have fellowship in eternity with their creator. This purpose, however, would seem to

have been frustrated by human sin, which comes as a barrier between humanity and God. A fundamental disruption has thus been introduced into creation. Its moral ordering has been violated. The redemption of humanity is thus called for, in order that the natural rectitude of the created order may be restored. In this sense, Anselm understands redemption as a restoration of humanity to its original status within creation.

How, then, can we be redeemed? Anselm stresses that God is obliged to redeem us in a way that is consistent with the moral ordering of the creation, reflecting God's own nature. God cannot create the universe in one way, as an expression of God's will and nature, and then violate its moral order by acting in a completely different way in the redemption of humanity. God must redeem us in a way that is consistent with God's own nature and purposes. Redemption must, in the first place, be moral, and in the second, be *seen* to be moral. God cannot employ one standard of morality at one point, and another later on. God is therefore under a self-imposed obligation to respect the moral order of the creation.

Having established this point, Anselm then considers how redemption is possible. The basic dilemma can be summarized as follows. God cannot restore us to fellowship without first dealing with human sin. Sin is a disruption of the moral ordering of the universe. It represents the rebellion of the creation against its creator. It represents an insult and an offense to God. The situation must therefore be made right before fellowship between God and humanity can be restored. God must therefore "make good" the situation in a way that is consistent with both the divine mercy and the divine righteousness. Anselm thus introduces the concept of a "satisfaction" – a payment or other action which compensates for the offense of human sin. Once this satisfaction has been made, the situation can revert to normal. But this satisfaction must first be made.

The problem, Anselm observes, is that human beings do not have the ability to make this satisfaction. It lies beyond their resources. They need to make it – but they are unable to do so. Humanity ought to make satisfaction for its sins, but cannot. And while God is under no obligation to make satisfaction, God could do this, if it was appropriate. Therefore, Anselm argues, if God were to become a human being, the resulting God-person would have both the *obligation* (as a human being)

and the *ability* (as God) to make the necessary satisfaction. Thus the incarnation leads to a just solution to the human dilemma. The death of Jesus Christ upon the cross demonstrates God's total opposition to sin, while at the same time providing the means by which sin could be really and truly forgiven, and the way opened to renewed fellowship between humanity and God.

The basic idea is that the value of the satisfaction thus offered had to be equivalent to the weight of human sin. Anselm argued that the Son of God became incarnate in order that Christ, as God incarnate, would possess both the human *obligation* to pay the satisfaction, and the divine *ability* to pay a satisfaction of the magnitude necessary for redemption. This idea is faithfully reproduced by Mrs. Cecil F. Alexander (1818–95) in her famous hymn of 1848, "There is a green hill far away":

> There was no other good enough
> To pay the price of sin;
> He only could unlock the gate
> Of heaven, and let us in.

The theological basis of the notion of "satisfaction" was developed further in the thirteenth century by Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas sees the adequacy of the "satisfaction of Christ" to compensate for human sin as resting on three factors, as follows:

> A proper satisfaction comes about when someone offers to the person offended something which gives him a delight greater than his hatred of the offense. Now Christ by suffering as a result of love and obedience offered to God something greater than what might be exacted in compensation for the whole offense of humanity; firstly, because of the greatness of the love, as a result of which he suffered; secondly, because of the worth of the life which he laid down for a satisfaction, which was the life of God and of a human being; thirdly, because of the comprehensiveness of his passion and the greatness of the sorrow which he took upon himself.

Aquinas here follows Anselm in arguing that the inherent worth of Christ's death is grounded in his divinity. Why is Christ's death so significant, and possessed of a capacity to redeem us? Because, Aquinas

argues, he – and he alone – is God incarnate. As Aquinas puts it, "the worth of Christ's flesh is to be reckoned, not just according to the nature of flesh but according to the person who assumed it, in that it was the flesh of God, from whom it gained an infinite worth." In response to the question of why the death of one person should have possessed such saving significance, Aquinas points out that Christ's significance in this matter does not rest on his humanity, but on his divinity.

Nevertheless, despite this emphasis on the divinity of Christ, it is clear that Aquinas has taken care to ensure that the importance of the humanity of Christ should not be overlooked. The first and third of his three considerations can each be argued to give a significant place to Christ's humanity in the process of redemption, by stressing the saving importance of Christ's love and suffering. Anselm tended to treat Christ's humanity as little more than the means by which Christ was able to justly bear the penalty due for human sin; Aquinas is thus able to offer a more positive assessment of the soteriological role of the humanity of Christ.

But how does Christ's achievement upon the cross affect us? In what way do we share in the benefits of his death and resurrection? Anselm felt that this point did not require discussion, and so gave no guidance on the matter. Later writers, however, felt that it needed to be addressed. Three main ways of understanding how believers relate to Christ in this manner may be noted.

Participation. Through faith, believers participate in Jesus Christ. They are "in Christ," to use Paul's famous phrase. They are caught up in him, and share in his risen life. As a result of this, they share in all the benefits won by Christ, through his obedience upon the cross.

Representation. Christ is the covenant representative of humanity. Through faith, we come to stand within the covenant between God and humanity. All that Christ has won for us is available to us, on account of the covenant. Just as God entered into a covenant with Israel, so God has entered into a similar covenant with his church. Christ, by his obedience upon the cross, represents God's covenant people, winning benefits for them as their representative. By coming to faith, individuals come to stand within the covenant, and thus participate in all its benefits, won by Christ.

Substitution. Christ is here understood to be our substitute. We ought to have been crucified, on account of our sins; Christ is crucified in our place. God allows Christ to stand in our place, taking his guilt upon himself, in order that Christ's righteousness, won by obedience upon the cross, might become ours.

Up to this point, we have focused on the nature of salvation, considering primarily the questions of the basis and nature of salvation. Yet there is another question that needs to be considered here: from what are we saved? This leads us to consider the nature of sin.

Salvation, sin, and Christ

What is sin? Although in everyday language the word "sin" means something like "a moral failing" or "an immoral act," the term has a more precise theological meaning. The fundamental sense of "sin" is something that separates humanity from God. Salvation is the breaking down of the barrier of separation between humanity and God on account of Christ. Many Christian theologians see this anticipated or symbolized in an incident that took place at the time of Christ's death – the rending of the temple curtain (Matthew 27:51). As this curtain separated the "holy of holies" from ordinary people, it could be taken to point to the removal of barriers between humanity and God through the death of Christ.

Sin is thus the antithesis of salvation. It is quite simple to develop a list of fundamental New Testament concepts of salvation, and link them with their corresponding concepts of sin. Examples in the box will help make this point.

Sin	Salvation
Alienation	Reconciliation
Captivity	Liberation
Guilt	Forgiveness
Condemnation	Vindication
Illness	Healing
Being lost	Being found

A related idea here is "original sin," a notion that is especially associated with Augustine of Hippo, but which is widely accepted within

western Christianity. For Augustine, human beings sin as a result of some intrinsic disposition towards sin, which he termed "original sin." Individual sinful actions or attitudes were the result of some inbuilt flaw within human nature, which inclined them towards sin. Sinful acts are thus the symptoms of a sinful condition. Salvation, for Augustine, must thus address this sinful disposition.

Augustine explored this idea using a number of images, including the idea that sin was to be thought of as a disease or illness, which human beings were unable to cure themselves. For Augustine, the gospel promised the healing of this sinful disposition, as a result of which human beings might begin to break free from natural inclinations towards sin and evil. Augustine saw this idea expressed particularly well in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). The church, he concluded, was like a hospital, in which those who were damaged or wounded by sin could find healing and restoration.

So how does this connection between sin and salvation show itself in the person of Jesus Christ, as the savior of humanity? How does the saving work of Christ relate to the human predicament? This question was addressed by the Byzantine theologian Nicholas Cabasilas (born ca. 1322), who argued that Christ's death took place in such a way that he was able to deal with each of the three afflictions of sinful humanity – namely, its transient and finite human nature, its sinful character, and its ultimate fate of death. In each of these respects, Cabasilas argued, Christ entered into the human situation, and transformed it. By becoming incarnate, he transformed human nature. By dying on the cross, he defeated sin. And through his resurrection, Christ defeated the power of death. By doing all these three things, Christ abolished the obstacles in the way of humanity returning to God, and sharing fellowship with its creator and redeemer.

A somewhat different approach emerged in reformed theology during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, although the ideas can be traced back much earlier than this. This approach is normally referred to as the "threefold office of Christ," referring to the three roles or functions that Christ plays in the drama of redemption. Christ, it is argued, brought to fulfillment the three great "offices" or "roles" of the Old Testament – the prophet, priest, and king.

These three categories were seen as a convenient summary of all that Jesus Christ had achieved in order to redeem his people. Jesus is

prophet (Matthew 21:11; Luke 7:16), priest (Hebrews 2:17; 3:1), and king (Matthew 21:5; 27:11), bringing together in his one person the three great offices of the Old Testament. Jesus is the prophet who, like Moses, would see God face to face (Deuteronomy 17:15); he is the king who, like David, will establish a new people of God, and reign over them in justice and compassion (2 Samuel 7:12–16); he is the priest who will cleanse his people of their sins. Thus the three gifts brought to Jesus by the Magi (or Wise Men: Matthew 2:1–12) were seen as reflecting these three functions.

The seventeenth-century Genevan theologian François Turrettini (1623–87) set out this approach with particular clarity. Identifying the threefold crisis of humanity as consisting of "ignorance, guilt, and bondage to sin," Turrettini argues that Christ meets each of these needs, and transforms them through the redemption that he achieved through his cross and resurrection.

> The threefold misery of humanity resulting from sin (that is, ignorance, guilt, and the oppression and bondage of sin) required this threefold office. Ignorance is healed through the prophetic office, guilt through the priestly, and the oppression and bondage of sin through the kingly. The prophetic light scatters the darkness of error; the merit of the priest removes guilt and obtains reconciliation for us; the power of the king takes away the bondage of sin and death. The prophet shows God to us; the priest leads us to God; and the king joins us together with God, and glorifies us with him. The prophet illuminates the mind by the spirit of enlightenment; the priest soothes the heart and conscience by the spirit of consolation; the king subdues rebellious inclinations by the spirit of sanctification.

This pattern became widespread in later Reformed theology, as can be seen from the writings of the great nineteenth-century Princeton theologian Charles Hodge (1797–1878). For Hodge, fallen humanity needs "a Savior who is a prophet to instruct us; a priest to atone and to make intercession for us; and a king to rule over and protect us."

Earlier in this chapter, we looked at some Pauline understandings of the nature of salvation. So how has Christian theology understood the nature of salvation? We have given some thought to Christian understandings of how salvation is achieved. But what about the nature of salvation? Down the ages, Christian theology has developed a number

of ways of conceptualizing salvation, often by unfolding and some-
times expanding New Testament images. In what follows, we shall look
at two such ways of understanding salvation, one especially associated
with the Orthodox tradition, and the other with Protestantism.

An Orthodox perspective: salvation as deification

"God became human, in order that humans might become God"
(Athanasius of Alexandria). This theological slogan lies behind much
of the soteriological reflection of the eastern Christian tradition, both
during the patristic period and in the modern Greek and Russian
Orthodox theological traditions. Salvation is here understood as "deifi-
cation" – "becoming divine" or "being made divine." It echoes ideas
found in the New Testament, which speaks of believers becoming
"participants of the divine nature" (1 Peter 1:4).

Critics of the notion of "deification" have suggested that it repre-
sents a Greek philosophical notion that was improperly accommodated
by eastern Christianity. Others, however, argue that the concept has
deep biblical roots, pointing out that the notion is present in many
western writers, including Augustine of Hippo, Martin Luther, John
Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards. What distinguishes the Orthodox tradi-
tion is the emphasis it places upon this way of thinking about salvation.

A modern Orthodox writer who places considerable emphasis on
the notion of deification is the Russian writer Vladimir Lossky (1904–
58). In a 1953 essay on the theme of "redemption and deification,"
Lossky sets out the distinctive Orthodox understanding of the rela-
tion of the descent of God to humanity and the subsequent ascent of
humanity to God:

> The descent [*katabasis*] of the divine person of Christ makes human
> persons capable of an ascent [*anabasis*] in the Holy Spirit. It was necessary
> that the voluntary humiliation, the redemptive self-emptying [*kenosis*] of
> the Son of God should take place, so that fallen men might accomplish
> their vocation of *theosis*, the deification of created beings by uncreated
> grace. Thus the redeeming work of Christ – or rather, more generally
> speaking, the Incarnation of the Word – is seen as directly related to the
> ultimate goal of creatures: to know union with God. If this union has
> been accomplished in the divine person of the Son, who is God become

man, it is necessary that each human person should in turn become god by grace, or become "a partaker in the divine nature," according to St. Peter's expression (2 Peter 1:4).

Salvation as being righteous in the sight of God

An approach to understanding salvation which became especially important within Protestantism is the idea of being righteous in the sight of God. This concern lies behind a core question asked by Martin Luther: "How do I find a gracious God?" Luther's question expressed his deep conviction that sinners could not hope to find acceptance in the sight of a righteous God. For Luther, the question of salvation came to be linked with the issue of how guilt-ridden humans could ever possess a righteousness which would enable them to stand in God's presence.

This concern is by no means outdated, as can be seen from the words of C. S. Lewis (1898–1963) in *Mere Christianity* (1952): "In my most clearsighted moments not only do I not think myself a nice man, but I know that I am a very nasty one. I can look at some of the things I have done with horror and loathing." Such concerns naturally led to the use of legal or forensic categories in relation to the question of justification. For Luther, the gospel offered a justifying righteousness to believers – a righteousness which would shield them from condemnation, and permit them to enter into the presence of God.

Such insights were developed within later Protestant orthodoxy, and achieved a wide circulation in popular Protestant devotional writings and hymns. In a period in which the threat of divine punishment was taken with considerable seriousness (witness Jonathan Edwards's passionate sermons on this theme), the idea of deliverance from condemnation on account of sin was regarded as of central importance to the gospel. This same emphasis is found in Charles Wesley's hymn "And can it be?", which understands salvation as being "clothed" with righteousness in the sight of God.

> No condemnation now I dread;
> Jesus, and all in him, is mine!
> Alive in him, my living head!
> And clothed in righteousness divine.

Salvation, Christ, and the redeemed life

As we have seen, one aspect of the Christian understanding of salvation is that it is specifically linked with the death and resurrection of Christ. This is one important way in which the Christian notion of salvation can be distinguished from the secular idea of liberation or self-fulfillment, or from the ideas of salvation found in other religions. There is, however, another way in which the Christian idea of salvation is specifically coupled to Jesus of Nazareth – namely, that Christ provides a model or paradigm for the redeemed life. Christ in some sense gives shape or specification to Christian existence.

In general, mainstream Christianity affirms that the Christian life is made possible through Christ, while recognizing two quite distinct ways in which the resulting Christian life is "shaped" or "specified" by him:

1. The Christian life takes the form of the believer's sustained attempt to imitate Christ. Having become a Christian, the believer now treats Christ as an example of the ideal relationship to God and other people, and attempts to mimic this relationship. This "mimetic" approach may perhaps be seen at its best in the works of some later medieval spiritual writers. A particularly good example can be found in Thomas à Kempis's famous *Imitation of Christ*. This great work of monastic spirituality places emphasis upon the human responsibility to bring one's life into line with the example set by Christ, especially the idea of "bearing the cross."
2. The Christian life is a process of "being conformed to Christ," in which the outward aspects of the believer's life are brought into line with the inward relationship to Christ, established through faith. This approach is characteristic of writers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, and is based on the idea of God conforming the believer to the likeness of Christ through the process of renewal and regeneration brought about by the Holy Spirit.

At this point, we need to note an important issue that was debated during the Pelagian controversy of the early fifth century. Is salvation to be understood as a gracious gift which God bestows upon us? Or is it something that we must earn or achieve through our own efforts? The Pelagian controversy pitted Augustine of Hippo against the British

theologian and moral reformer Pelagius. For Augustine, salvation was the gracious gift of God – something that sinful human beings could never hope to achieve by their own efforts. Human moral improvement and spiritual development were not conditions of salvation, but its consequence. In other words, Augustine saw good works as the outcome of divine grace; they were not required in order to receive grace in the first place.

Pelagius saw things very differently. God commanded human beings to be morally perfect, and this implied that human beings had the capacity for perfection – for example, by imitating Christ, or by fulfilling the demands of the Old Testament law. Salvation was thus the outcome of human efforts and achievements.

This debate continues today. Do Christians aim to imitate Christ, seeing this as something that we can attain through our own efforts? Or does God assist us to become like Christ through grace, so that we are conformed to Christ? Most Christian theologians side with Augustine, believing that he captures the spirit of the New Testament more than Pelagius, who often seems to reduce Christianity to some form of legalism or moralism.

Engaging with a text

Our text for further study is taken from a sermon preached by Augustine of Hippo, one of the Christian church's greatest theologians. Augustine had a reputation as a lucid and powerful preacher, and his sermons include detailed yet very accessible accounts of the major themes of Christian theology. Unsurprisingly, Augustine regularly preached on the meaning of the cross, and the means by which Christ's death and resurrection secured human salvation. The sermon is based on the opening section of the fifth chapter of the book of Revelation, which allows Augustine to explore how Christ can be thought of as both a lion and a lamb – the "lion of Judah" and the "lamb of God" who takes away the sin of the world.

> If Christ had not been put to death, death would not have died. The devil was conquered by his own trophy of victory. The devil jumped for joy, when he seduced the first man, and cast him down to death. By seducing the first man, he killed him; by killing the last man, he lost the first from his snare. The victory of our Lord Jesus Christ came

when he rose again from the dead, and ascended into heaven. It was at this point that the text from the Book of Revelation, which you heard read today, was fulfilled: "The lion of the tribe of Judah has won the day" (Revelation 5:5). The one who was slain as a lamb is now called a lion – a lion on account of his courage, a lamb on account of his innocence; a lion, because he was unconquered; a lamb, because of his gentleness. By his death, the slain lamb has conquered the lion who "goes around seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). The devil, on the other hand, is here called a lion for his savagery, rather than his bravery … The devil jumped for joy when Christ died; and by the very death of Christ the devil was overcome: he took, as it were, the bait in the mousetrap. He rejoiced at Christ's death, believing himself to be the commander of death. But that which caused his joy dangled the bait before him. The Lord's cross was the devil's mousetrap: the bait which caught him was the death of the Lord.

After you have read through this text, try answering these questions, either on your own or in your discussion group.

1. Refresh your memory of the three major approaches to the meaning of the cross that we considered earlier in this chapter. Which of them seems to be the "best fit" for Augustine's approach?
2. Try to summarize, in your own words, the basic argument that Augustine sets out. In what way does Christ's death on the cross deliver humanity from its entanglement with the power of the devil, according to Augustine?
3. What does Augustine mean when he writes: "The Lord's cross was the devil's mousetrap"? What impact do you think this would have had on his audience? What point do you think he was trying to make?

Chapters 4 and 5 have focused on aspects of the Christian understanding of Jesus Christ. We now need to return to reflect further on the Christian understanding of God. In the next two chapters we will initially look at understandings of the Holy Spirit, before moving on to consider the climax of Christian thinking about the nature of God in the doctrine of the Trinity.

CHAPTER 6

Spirit

One of the most important theological developments of the late twentieth century was the rise of the charismatic movement. The origins of this movement can be traced back to the early years of the century, particularly in the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles in 1906. Today, the charismatic movement is a major influence in global Christianity, affecting most mainline Christian churches. Its emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in worship and the Christian life has given a much higher profile to theological reflections on role of the Spirit. Yet Christian theologians have always been aware of the importance of the Holy Spirit, even if recent developments have further raised awareness of its significance. In this chapter, we shall consider some leading themes in this area of theology, which is often referred to as *pneumatology* (from the Greek word *pneuma*, "spirit").

Biblical models of the Holy Spirit

"God is spirit" (John 4:24). But what does this tell us about God? The English language uses at least three words – "wind," "breath," and "spirit" – to translate a single Hebrew term, *ruach*. This important Hebrew word has a depth of meaning which it is virtually impossible to reproduce in English or other modern languages. *Ruach*, traditionally translated simply as "spirit," is associated with a range of meanings, each of which casts some light on the complex associations of the Christian notion of the Holy Spirit.

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Figure 13   A depiction of the Day of Pentecost – Joseph Ignaz Mildorfer, *The Coming of the Holy Spirit*, 1750s, oil on canvas, 55 × 33 cm. The Day of Pentecost is traditionally seen as marking the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the early church. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest.

1. *Spirit as wind*. The Old Testament writers are careful not to iden-tify God with the wind and thus reduce God to the level of a natural force. Nevertheless, a parallel is drawn between the power of the wind and that of God. To speak of God as spirit is to call to mind the surg-ing energy of the "Lord of Hosts," and remind Israel of the power and dynamism of the God who had called Israel out of Egypt. This image of the spirit as redemptive power is perhaps stated in its most significant form in the account of the exodus from Egypt in which a powerful wind divides the Red Sea (Exodus 14:21). Here, the idea of *ruach* conveys both the power and the redemptive purpose of God.

The image of the wind also allowed the complexity of the human experience of God to be accounted for, and visualized in a genuinely helpful manner. The Old Testament writers were conscious of experiencing the presence and activity of God in two quite distinct manners. Sometimes, God was experienced as a judge, one who condemned Israel for its waywardness; yet at other times, God is experienced as one who refreshes the chosen people, like water in a dry land. The image of the wind conveyed both these ideas in a powerful manner.

Israel bordered the Mediterranean Sea to the west and the great deserts to the east. The east winds brought a mist of fine hot sand which scorched vegetation and parched the land. Travelers' accounts of these winds speak of their remarkable force and power. Even the light of the sun was often concealed by the sandstorm thrown up by the wind. This was seen by biblical writers as a model of the finitude and transitoriness of the creation. "The grass withers and the flowers fall, when the breath of the Lord blows on them" (Isaiah 40:7). Just as the scorching east wind destroyed plants and grass, so God would overthrow seemingly permanent human empires – such as those of Assyria and Babylon.

At the time when the prophet Isaiah was writing, Israel was held captive in Babylon. The "Babylonian Captivity" or "Exile" began in 597 BC, and continued until the fall of the Babylonian empire in 538 BC. To many, it seemed that the great Babylonian empire was a permanent historical feature, which nothing could change. Yet the transitoriness of human achievements when the "breath of the Lord" blows upon them is asserted by the prophet, as he proclaims the pending destruction of that empire. God alone is permanent, and all else is in a state of flux and change.

The western winds, however, brought rain and coolness to the parched dry land as they blew in from the sea, mitigating the intensity of the desert heat. Just as these gentle cooling breezes from the west brought refreshment, by moistening the dry ground in winter and cooling the heat of the day in summer, so God was understood to refresh human spiritual needs. In a series of powerful images, God is compared by the Old Testament writers to the rain brought by the western wind (Hosea 6:3), refreshing the land.

2. *Spirit as breath*. The idea of spirit is associated with life. When God created Adam, God breathed into him the breath of life, as a result of which he became a "living being" (Genesis 2:7). The basic difference between a living and a dead human being is that the former breathes and the latter does not. This led to the idea that life was dependent upon breath. God is the one who breathes the breath of life into empty shells, and brings them to life. God brought Adam to life by breathing into him. The famous vision of the valley of the dry bones (Ezekiel 37:1–14) also illustrates this point. Can these dry bones live? The bones only come to life when breath enters into them (Ezekiel 37:9–10).

The model of God as spirit thus conveys the fundamental insight that God is the one who gives life, even the one who is able to bring the dead back to life. It is thus important to note that *ruach* is often linked with God's work of creation (e.g., Genesis 1:2; Job 26:12–13; 33:4; Psalm 104:27–31), even if the precise role of the Spirit is left unspecified. There is clearly an association between "Spirit" and the giving of life through creation. This point was made clearly by the English theologian Charles Gore (1853–1932), reflecting on the role of the spirit in the animation or "vitalization" of creation.

> "I believe in the Holy Ghost, the giver of life." All life is His operation. "Wherever the Holy Spirit is, there is also life; and wherever life is, there is also the Holy Spirit." Thus if creation takes its rise in the will of the Father, if it finds its law in the being of the Word or Son, yet the effective instrument of creation, the "finger of God," the moving principle of vitalization is the Holy Spirit, "the divider and distributor of the gifts of life."

3. *Spirit as charism*. The technical term "charism" refers to the "filling of an individual with the spirit of God," by which the person in question is enabled to perform tasks which would otherwise be impossible. The gift of wisdom is often portrayed as a consequence of the endowment of the Spirit (Genesis 41:38–9; Exodus 28:3; 35:31; Deuteronomy 34:9). At times, the Old Testament attributes gifts of leadership or military prowess to the influence of the Spirit (Judges 14:6, 19; 15:14, 15). However, the most pervasive aspect of this feature of the Spirit relates to the question of prophecy.

The Old Testament does not offer much in the way of clarification concerning the manner in which the prophets were inspired, guided, or motivated by the Holy Spirit. In the period before the Israelites were exiled in Babylon, prophecy was often associated with ecstatic experiences of God, linked with wild behavior (1 Samuel 10:6; 19:24). Nevertheless, the activity of prophecy gradually became associated with the *message* rather than the *behavior* of the prophet. The prophet's credentials rest upon an endowment with the Spirit (Isaiah 61:1; Ezekiel 2:1–2; Micah 3:8; Zechariah 7:12), which authenticates the prophet's message – a message which is usually described as "the word [*dabhar*] of the Lord."

The New Testament is rich in references to the Spirit, which plays a particularly significant role in the Pauline letters. For Paul, the Spirit has been poured out on all believers, and dwells in their hearts. This allows Paul to distinguish the Christian "life in the Spirit" from an unchristian "life in the flesh" (Romans 5:5; 8:9–11; Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 4:5). While it is difficult to give a brief synopsis of Paul's understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer and the church, the following points are generally regarded as being of particular importance.

1. The Spirit provides a proof or demonstration that believers are indeed children of God (Romans 8:16; 2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5).
2. The Spirit is the ground or source of spiritual gifts in the life of the individual and church, including discernment, obedience, wisdom, interpretation, and ecstatic utterances (Romans 12:3–8; 1 Corinthians 12:4–11).

Irenaeus on the role of the Holy Spirit

The challenge faced by Christian theology in the second century was to find a distinct theological place for the Spirit, rather than to think of the Spirit simply as another (or different kind of) Son. Irenaeus of Lyons, writing in the second century, is a witness to the important process of clarification which took place during the early church concerning the person and work of the Holy Spirit. The development of the distinctive vocabulary of trinitarian theology dated from a century

later; Irenaeus does not use these technical terms, which were simply not available to him. Irenaeus's theology is best seen as an elaboration of the basic "rule of faith" which was being widely adopted around this time.

In his *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, Irenaeus insisted upon the distinct yet related roles of Father, Son, and Spirit within the economy of salvation. He affirmed his faith in "God the Father, uncreated," in "the Word of God, the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ," and the "Holy Spirit." In commenting on each of these three persons, Irenaeus offers a succinct account of the role of the Spirit: "in the fullness of time, [the Holy Spirit] was poured out in a new way on our human nature in order to renew humanity throughout the entire world in the sight of God."

This brief statement echoes a widespread consensus within the second-century church, which saw the Spirit primarily as God's means of renewing and restoring human nature, and as the inspiration of prophecy – an important role within the early church. Irenaeus clearly believed that the idea of a personal entity called "the Spirit" alongside God the Father and Jesus Christ as the Son and Word of God was an integral aspect of the faith handed down to the church from the apostles. Yet Irenaeus developed these ideas in new directions. Two developments which are generally attributed to him are the motif of the Word and Spirit as the "two hands of God" in creation, and the tendency to speak of the Spirit in terms of "wisdom" (Latin: *sapientia*). We shall consider each of these points briefly.

For Irenaeus, God brings the created order into being through Jesus Christ. Yet he is clear that the Holy Spirit has a role in this process. Irenaeus speaks of the Wisdom and Word of God as the "hands" of God. "For the Word and Wisdom, the Son and the Spirit, were always present with [God], by whom and in whom, all things were made." There is one God, who created and arranged all things by the Word and Wisdom. Human beings were "created in the likeness of God by the hands of the Father, that is, by the Son and the Holy Spirit."

The second theme associated with Irenaeus is speaking of the Spirit as God's "wisdom," implying that the Spirit as wisdom is present alongside the "Word" in God from the beginning. It also identifies a distinct role for the Holy Spirit in the economy of salvation, namely that of

binding the creation together or bringing it to its intended goal. Most earlier Christian writers refer to the *Logos* as an agent of creation, but hardly any included the Spirit as a creator along with the *Logos*. Similarly, most early patristic writers followed Paul in regarding Jesus Christ as the "wisdom of God" (see 1 Corinthians 1:24). Yet Irenaeus identified this preexistent wisdom with the Holy Spirit, thus distinguishing the Holy Spirit from the *Logos*. Irenaeus made this distinction between the Word and Wisdom particularly clear from this important passage: "We should know that the only true God is the one who made and formed and breathed in them the breath of life, and nourishes us by creation, establishing all things by his Word, and binding them together by his Wisdom."

The debate over the divinity of the Holy Spirit

As we saw earlier, biblical writers clearly saw the spirit as an aspect of God's power, presence and activity in the world. But is the Holy Spirit itself *divine*? The early church found itself puzzled by the Spirit, and unable to make much in the way of theological sense of this area of doctrine. This is not to say that the Holy Spirit did not play a prominent role in the early church. The second-century writer Montanus, who is known to have been active during the period 135–75, placed considerable emphasis on the activity of the Spirit, particularly in relation to dreams, visions, and prophetic revelations.

The relative absence of extensive discussion of the role of the Holy Spirit in the first three centuries reflects the fact that theological debate centered elsewhere. The Greek patristic writers had, in their view, more important things to do than worry about formalizing a doctrine of the Holy Spirit when vital political and Christological debates were raging all around them. This point was made by the fourth-century writer Amphilochius of Iconium, who pointed out that the Arian controversy had first to be resolved before any serious discussion over the status of the Holy Spirit could get under way. The theological development of the early church was generally a response to public debates; once a serious debate got under way, doctrinal clarification was the inevitable outcome. The Nicene Creed, in its original form set out by the Council of Nicea in 325, offers surprisingly little affirmation or explanation of

the Holy Spirit. Yet the theological groundwork for the expansion of the church's vision of the Spirit had been laid by this stage.

Athanasius and Basil of Caesarea (ca. 330–79) made a powerful case for the recognition of the divinity of the Holy Spirit, and made an appeal to the formula which had by then become universally accepted for baptism. Since the time of the New Testament (see Matthew 28:18–20), Christians were baptized in the name of "the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." Athanasius argued that this had momentous implications for an understanding of the status of the person of the Holy Spirit. In his *Letter to Serapion*, Athanasius declared that the baptismal formula clearly pointed to the Spirit sharing the same divinity as the Father and the Son. This argument eventually prevailed.

It is instructive to compare the statements of the Councils of Nicea (325) and Constantinople (381) on the person and work of the Spirit. The short statement of 325 gives way to the much longer statement of 381, showing how much more confident the church felt about its understanding of this area of theology as a result of the discussions and debates of the fourth century.

325: [I believe] in the Holy Spirit.

381: [I believe] in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life, who pro-
ceeds from the Father, and is worshipped and glorified together
with the Father and Son, who spoke by the prophets.

(Note that the document often referred to as the "Nicene Creed" is actually the modified form of this creed, as set out by the Council of Constantinople in 381.)

Many patristic writers were hesitant to speak openly of the Spirit as "God," in that this practice was not sanctioned by scripture – a point discussed at some length by Basil of Caesarea in his treatise on the Holy Spirit (374–5). Even as late as 380, Gregory of Nazianzus conceded that many Orthodox Christian theologians were uncertain as to whether to treat the Holy Spirit "as an activity, as a creator, or as God."

This caution can be seen in the final statement of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit formulated by the Council of Constantinople, which we have just noted. The Spirit was here described, not as "God," but as "the Lord and giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, and is worshipped and glorified together with the Father and Son." Yet despite this slight

theological ambiguity, the Council was clear that the Spirit was to be treated as having the same dignity and rank as the Father and Son, even if the term "God" was not to be used explicitly in speaking of the Spirit.

Three factors were of special importance in establishing the divinity of the Holy Spirit during the later fourth century. First, as Gregory of Nazianzus stressed, scripture applied all the titles of God to the Spirit, with the exception of "unbegotten." Gregory drew particular attention to the use of the word "holy" to refer to the Spirit, arguing that this holiness did not result from any external source, but was the direct consequence of the nature of the Spirit. The Spirit was to be considered as the one who sanctifies, rather than the one who requires to be sanctified.

Second, the functions which are specific to the Holy Spirit establish the divinity of the Spirit. Didymus the Blind (died 398) was one of many writers to point out that the Spirit was responsible for the creating, renewing, and sanctification of God's creatures. Yet how could one creature renew or sanctify another creature? Only if the Spirit was divine could sense be made of these functions. If the Holy Spirit performed functions which were specific to God, it must follow that the Holy Spirit shares in the divine nature. This point is stated with particular clarity by Basil of Caesarea:

> All who are in need of sanctification turn to the Spirit; all those seek him who live by virtue, for his breath refreshes them and comes to their aid in the pursuit of their natural and proper end. Capable of perfecting others, the Spirit himself lacks nothing. He is not a being who needs to restore his strength, but himself supplies life … and shares the gifts of grace, heavenly citizenship, a place in the chorus of angels, joy without end, abiding in God, being made like God and – the greatest of them all – being made God.

For Basil, the Spirit makes creatures both to be like God and to be God – and only one who is divine can bring this about. (In chapter 4, we explored how this same argument was also used to infer the divinity of Christ from the fact that the New Testament recognized him as "savior.")

Third, the reference to the Spirit in the baptismal formula of the church was interpreted as supporting the divinity of the Spirit.

Baptism took place in the name of the "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:17–20). Athanasius and others argued that this formula established the closest of connections between the three members of the Trinity, making it impossible to suggest that the Father and Son shared in the substance of the Godhead while the Spirit was nothing other than a creature. In a similar way, Basil of Caesarea argued that the baptismal formula clearly implied the inseparability of Father, Son, and Spirit. This verbal association, according to Basil, clearly had considerable theological implications.

These arguments have commanded wide support within Christian theology, and have had a significant impact on both eastern and western Christian theologies of the Holy Spirit. Yet divergences remain, one of which we shall consider in what follows.

The *filioque* debate

One of the most significant events in the early history of the church was the emergence of a broad agreement within Christianity throughout the Roman empire, both east and west, on the text and leading ideas of the Nicene creed (325). This document was intended to bring doctrinal stability to the church in a period of considerable importance in its history, following the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine to Christianity. Part of that agreed text referred to the Holy Spirit "proceeding from the Father," drawing on the language of John 15.26. By the ninth century, however, the western church had unilaterally altered this phrase, speaking of the Holy Spirit "proceeding from the Father *and the Son*." The origins of this addition are generally agreed to be located in Spain, with the third Council of Toledo (589), which included the following statement: "I believe in the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and Son [*qui ex patre filioque procedit*]."

So what difference does this addition of the Latin term *filioque* make? Is it simply a matter of words? Or does it express something much deeper? The *filioque* debates often focus on the different concepts of the Trinity which are held by the eastern and western churches, focusing particularly on their understandings of the Holy Spirit.

Greek patristic writers insisted that there was only one source of being within the Trinity. The Father alone was the sole and supreme cause of all things, including the Son and the Spirit within the Trinity. The Son and the Spirit derive from the Father, but in different manners. In searching for suitable terms to express this relationship, theologians eventually fixed on two quite distinct images: the Son is begotten of the Father, while the Spirit proceeds from the Father. These two terms are intended to express the idea that both Son and Spirit derive from the Father, but in different ways.

The Cappadocian fathers, along with other Greek theologians of this period, believed it was important to distinguish the identities and functions of Son and Spirit. A failure to distinguish the ways in which Son and Spirit derive from the one and the same Father would lead to God having two sons, which would have raised insurmountable problems. Identical functions would seem to imply identical essences

There is thus no question of the Holy Spirit being *subordinate* to the Son. The Son is the Word of God, and the Spirit is the breath of God. The Father pronounces his word; at the same time as he utters this word, he breathes out in order to make this word capable of being heard and received. The visual imagery of a spoken word being propelled throughout the world thus helps illuminate both the distinctiveness of Son and Spirit, while at the same time affirming their mutual involvement in the work of the Father.

Within this context, it is unthinkable that the Holy Spirit should be thought of as proceeding from the Father and the Son. This would totally compromise the principle of the Father as the sole origin and source of all divinity. It would amount to affirming that there were two sources of divinity within the one Godhead, with all the internal contradictions and tensions that this would generate. If the Son were to share in the exclusive ability of the Father to be the source of all divinity, this ability would no longer be exclusive. For this reason, leading writers of the Greek church – such as Gregory Palamas and Photius the Great – regarded the western idea of a "double procession" of the Spirit with intense suspicion.

Western writers, however, took a different position. Augustine of Hippo argued that the Spirit had to be thought of as proceeding from

the Father *and* the Son – a notion of double procession. One of his main proof texts was John 20:22, in which the risen Christ is reported as having breathed upon his disciples, and said: "Receive the Holy Spirit." Augustine explains this as follows in his major treatise *On the Trinity*:

> Nor can we say that the Holy Spirit does not also proceed from the Son. After all, the Spirit is said to be the Spirit of both the Father and the Son. [John 20:22 is then cited] The Holy Spirit proceeds not only from the Father, but also from the Son.

So what understanding the of role of the Spirit does Augustine adopt? The answer lies in his distinctive understanding of the Spirit as the "bond of love" between Father and Son. The Spirit is to be thought of as the "bond of the Father and the Son [*patris et filii copula*]." The Father is only the Father of the Son, and the Son only the Son of the Father; the Spirit, however, is the Spirit of both Father and Son, binding them together in a bond of love.

Augustine develops this understanding of the person and work of the Holy Spirit further. Not only is the Spirit the bond of unity between Father and Son on the one hand; the same Spirit is also the bond of unity between God and believers on the other. The Spirit is a gift, given by God, which unites believers both to God and to other believers. The Holy Spirit forges bonds of unity between believers, upon which the unity of the church ultimately depends. The church is the "temple of the Holy Spirit," within which the Holy Spirit dwells. The same Spirit which binds together the Father and Son in the unity of the Godhead also binds together believers in the unity of the church. Yet eastern critics of this approach argue that it essentially reduces the role of the Spirit. Augustine, they complained, was really talking about the "Spirit of Christ," not the "Spirit of God."

This controversy remains important in ecumenical dialogues to the present day. It is now generally agreed that the eastern and western theological traditions have developed categories and conceptions that differ in substantial ways from one another, and which cannot easily be reconciled or declared to be equivalent. Recent ecumenical dialogues – such as the North American Orthodox–Catholic Theological Consultation (2003) – have taken considerable care to emphasize their shared

theological beliefs, while noting that certain beliefs remain contested, as does the language used to express these beliefs. Some closing words of that consultation merit further study:

> Gregory Nazianzen reminds us, in his *Fifth Theological Oration* on the divinity of the Holy Spirit, that the Church's slow discovery of the Spirit's true status and identity is simply part of the "order of theology," by which "lights break upon us gradually" in our understanding of the saving Mystery of God. Only if we "listen to what the Spirit is saying to the Churches" (Revelation 3:22), will we be able to remain faithful to the Good News preached by the Apostles, while growing in the understanding of that faith, which is theology's task.

What difference does this make? While the issues remain debated, there is a reasonable degree of clarity concerning the strengths and weaknesses of each position. The pneumatological advantages of the eastern position – that is, a single procession of the Spirit – include the avoidance of a "Christomonism" which limits God's work of revelation and salvation to Christ; a defense against dualism, modalism, and subordinationism; and the safeguarding of a panoramic vision of the work and activity of the Spirit. The pneumatological advantages of the western position – that is, a double procession of the Spirit – include the explicit recognition that the Spirit is a personal being rather than an impersonal force, power or activity; a defense against pantheism and imprecise forms of mysticism; and the provision of a specific Christological criterion for the evaluation of allegedly "spiritual" phenomena.

The functions of the Spirit

What does the Holy Spirit do? Many theologians have tried to provide brief summaries of the work of the spirit. A good example is found in Basil of Caesarea's succinct statement: "Through the Holy Spirit we are restored to paradise, led back to the Kingdom of heaven, adopted as children, given confidence to call God 'Father' and to share in Christ's grace, called children of light, and given a share in eternal glory."

Another classic statement of the work of the Holy Spirit is found in the liturgical sequence *Veni Sancte Spiritus* ("Come Holy Spirit"),

traditionally attributed to the medieval theologian Stephen Langton
(ca. 1150–228). This hymn (sometimes known as the "Golden
Sequence") speaks of the work of the Spirit using a number of images,
all focusing on the Spirit's role in recreating, renewing, healing, and
redirecting human nature. The Latin text of this sequence will be
familiar to some readers, and is difficult to translate into English
without losing its rhyme and rhythm. Two stanzas of the original
Latin are printed out here, along with my translation, to give an idea
of the comprehensive vision of the function of the Spirit found in this
famous liturgical piece.

> Lava quod est sordidum,
> riga quod est aridum,
> sana quod est saucium.
> Flecte quod est rigidum,
> fove quod est frigidum,
> rege quod est devium.

Wash what is dirty; refresh what is dry; heal what is wounded; bend
what is stubborn; melt what is frozen; direct what is wandering.

The Christian tradition has generally understood the work of the
Holy Spirit to focus on four broad areas: God's activity in the world,
revelation, salvation, and the Christian life. In what follows, we shall
provide a brief indication of the richness of the Christian understand-
ing of the role of the Spirit in each of these four areas.

1. God's active presence in the world

A central theme of the person and work of the Holy Spirit relates
to God's presence and action in the world beyond the boundaries of
Christian communities. The Spirit is seen as active in the world, prepar-
ing hearts and minds for an encounter with God. One of the most
familiar statements of this theme is found in Ambrosiaster's famous
statement: "whatever truth is said by anyone is said by the Holy Spirit."
This theme is found in many Christian writers, and is now often para-
phrased as "all truth is God's truth." However, the original reference
makes it clear that it is the Holy Spirit who leads people to truth, and
hence to God.

This emphasis on the Holy Spirit as God's active presence in the world has been a major theme in recent theological reflection on the nature of mission and evangelism. In his encyclical letter *Dominum et Vivificantem* ("Lord and Giver of Life"), published on Pentecost 1986, John Paul II emphasized that the Holy Spirit was actively present when anyone confronts and attempts to answer ultimate questions in life, including religious questions. The activity of God is not limited to the church, as the body of Christ; God is already present in the world, illuminating and informing minds.

2. The revelation of God to humanity

There has been a widespread recognition of the pivotal role of the Spirit in relation to the making of God known to humanity. In the second century, Irenaeus wrote of the "Holy Spirit, through whom the prophets prophesied, and our forebears learned of God and the righteous were led in the paths of justice." The task of the Holy Spirit is to lead the faithful into God's truth; without that Spirit, truth remains elusive. This idea is developed in the notion of the "inspiration of scripture," which affirms that the Bible, as a "means of grace," has a God-given authority by virtue of its origins. This doctrine, in various forms, is the common tradition of Christianity, and has its origins in the Bible itself, most notably the affirmation that "every Scripture is God-breathed [*theopneustos*]" (2 Timothy 3:16). Most Christian theologians affirm the activity of the Holy Spirit both in the inspiration of scripture, and in the subsequent responsibility of the church to interpret and apply this text.

In Protestant theology, however, the doctrine of the inspiration of scripture often serves an additional purpose – that of insisting on the primacy of scripture over the church. Whereas more Catholic writers point to the formation of the canon of scripture as indicating the authority of the church over that of scripture, Protestant writers argue that the church merely recognized an authority which was already present within scripture itself.

Yet it is not simply God's revelation which is linked with the work of the Spirit; the Spirit is also widely regarded as being involved in the human response to that revelation. Most Christian theologians have regarded faith itself as the result of the work of the Holy Spirit. John Calvin is one writer who draws attention to the pivotal role of

the Spirit in revealing God's truth and applying or "sealing" this truth to humanity. We have already considered this passage at the end of chapter 1; it is however, important to note it again in the context of this specific point.

> Now we shall have a right definition of faith if we say that it is a steady and certain knowledge of the divine benevolence towards us, which is founded upon the truth of the gracious promise of God in Christ, and is both revealed to our minds and sealed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

Several Christian writers also speak of the Holy Spirit in terms of a supernatural light, which enables people to see beyond the limits of natural human vision. A good example of this approach is found in the discussion of the role of the Holy Spirit in Cyril of Jerusalem's *Catechetical Lectures*, delivered in Jerusalem around the year 350.

> Consider someone who was previously in darkness who suddenly sees the sun. Their physical sight is now enlightened, enabling them to see things which they previously could not. In the same way, someone who receives the Holy Spirit is enlightened in their soul, and sees things beyond human sight, which they did not previously know. Their body remains on earth, yet their soul reflects the heavens. Like Isaiah, they see "the Lord sitting upon a throne high and lifted up" (Isaiah 6:1).

3. The appropriation of salvation

We have already noted how patristic writers justified the divinity of the Spirit with reference to the functions of the Spirit. Many of those functions relate directly to the doctrine of salvation; for example, the role of the Spirit in sanctification, making humanity like God, and divinization. This point is particularly important within the eastern Christian churches, with their traditional emphasis on deification; the western concept of salvation, which tends to be relational rather than ontological, nevertheless finds room for a role for the Spirit. The Holy Spirit plays a critical role in illuminating, healing and enabling humanity to take hold of Christ, and thus benefit from his identity and his work.

Protestant theologians of the sixteenth century placed particular emphasis upon this point. In Calvin's doctrine of the application of salvation, the Holy Spirit plays a major role in relation to the

establishment of a living relationship between Christ and believer. This can be seen more clearly in some of the Reformed confessions of this age, such as the Belgic Confession of Faith (1561).

> We believe that, to attain the true knowledge of this great mystery, the Holy Spirit creates in our hearts an upright faith, which embraces Jesus Christ with all his merits, takes hold of him, and seeks nothing more besides him.

A similar point is made in Catholic theology. For example, the Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation of the Second Vatican Council regularly affirms the critical role of the Spirit in preparing the human mind and heart for revelation and salvation. "To make this act of faith,

Figure 14 Meeting of the Second Vatican Council, St. Peter's, Rome. David Lees/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images.

the grace of God and the interior help of the Holy Spirit must precede and assist, moving the heart and turning it to God, opening the eyes of the mind and giving joy and ease to everyone in assenting to the truth and believing it."

4. The energization of the Christian life

For many writers, the Holy Spirit plays an especially important role in relation to the Christian life, both the individual and the corporate life. The fifth-century writer Cyril of Alexandria is one of many to stress the role of the Spirit in bringing unity within the church.

> All of us who have received the one and the same Spirit, that is, the Holy Spirit, are in a sense merged together with one another and with God. … Just as the power of the holy flesh of Christ united those in whom it dwells into one body, I think that, in much the same way, the one and undivided Spirit of God, who dwells in us all, leads us all into spiritual unity.

However, any properly Christian understanding of the role of the Spirit will go far beyond this, and will include reference to at least two other areas. First, the "making real" of God in personal and corporate worship and devotion. The importance of the role of the Spirit in relation to Christian prayer, spirituality, and worship has been stressed by many writers, classic and modern. Second, the enabling of believers to lead a Christian life, particularly in relation to morality.

Yet the Christian life is corporate, not just individual, and it is important to note the ecclesiological dimensions of the work of the Holy Spirit. Since the Second Vatican Council (1962–5), many Catholic theologians have explored the role of the Spirit in shaping and sustaining Christian community, and fostering its witness in the world. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) thus speaks of the church as both the "Body of Christ" and the "Temple of the Holy Spirit."

> The Spirit prepares people, and goes out to them with his grace, in order to draw them to Christ. The Spirit manifests the risen Lord to them, recalls his word to them and opens their minds to the understanding of his Death and Resurrection.

This compressed statement highlights many aspects of the classic understanding of the role of the Spirit in the Christian life – not least the important theme, especially associated with the Fourth Gospel, of the Spirit's role in "calling to mind" the person and words of Jesus of Nazareth (John 15:26).

Other aspects of pneumatology merit attention, even if they cannot be addressed in the limited space of this chapter. For example, growing interest in the theology of mission, linked with an increasing awareness of the importance of tracing God's imprints in other cultures and faiths, has led many to explore the role of the Spirit in the world, preparing the way for the proclamation of Christ. The activity of the Holy Spirit has never been understood to be limited to the church; it extends throughout the world. This can be seen particularly in the so-called "Turn to Pneumatology," evident at meetings of the World Council of Churches in 1990 and 1991.

The symbols of the Spirit: a dove, fire, and oil

Early Christianity developed a rich use of symbols as ways of expressing its fundamental beliefs and values. Of those symbols, the most important is the cross. Christians were baptized with the sign of the cross. Churches and other Christian places of meeting did more than merely include a cross; they were often built in the shape of a cross. We noted earlier how the symbol of a fish emerged as an important way of symbolizing core Christina beliefs about the identity and significance of Jesus Christ. Three other symbols emerged as important around this time, specifically linked with the Holy Spirit.

1. *A dove*. The gospel descriptions of the baptism of Jesus of Nazareth include reference to "the Spirit descending like a dove on him" (Mark 1:10). From the fifth century onwards, the image of a dove came to be used to represent the Holy Spirit, especially in the context of Christian baptism. This image was widely taken up in the Middle Ages, and is especially evident in the portrayal of the crucifixion of Christ. Many artistic representations of this event frame it in a trinitarian perspective. Although the predominant image is a suffering Christ, the figure of the Father and a dove (representing the

Spirit) are often incorporated into the background. The point being made is that redemption is a trinitarian, not simply a Christological, event.

2. *Fire*. Pentecost, the Christian feast which focused on the person of the Holy Spirit, is traditionally associated with image of fire. This tradition goes back to the New Testament, which speaks of "divided tongues, as of fire" appearing among those present on the original Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:3). This imagery was widely used in Christian symbolism. For example, Ephrem the Syrian used the sun as an analogy of the Trinity: the sun itself corresponds to the Father, its light to the Son, and its heat to the Spirit. This symbol of the Spirit is often used to illuminate the manner in which the Holy Spirit purifies or sanctifies individuals, by burning off impurities – for example, as a refiner purifies metal.

3. *Oil*. This third image picks up on the rich associations of olive oil, particularly within the religious life of ancient Israel. Oil was used to anoint kings and priests of Israel, and was a symbol of divine acceptance or endorsement. As we saw earlier, the important Christo-logical title "Messiah" derives from the Hebrew word for "anointed." Similarly, the prophet Elijah was told to anoint Elisha as his successor (1 Kings 19:16). A text which was particularly important to the early church in this respect was Isaiah 61:1, cited by Jesus of Nazareth at the beginning of his Galilean ministry: "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me." Many came to see some kind of causal link between being anointed with oil and the presence of the Spirit.

Engaging with a text

Throughout this chapter, we have considered questions about the iden-tity and role of the Holy Spirit. For many theologians, this identity and role has a particularly significant connection with Christian existence – for example, with preaching, worship, and prayer. One recent theolog-ical writer to make this point is Sarah Coakley, presently Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity at Cambridge University, England. Coakley's work has focused on the relation of systematic theology and Christian spirituality. In this extract from a 1998 discussion of the link between

a trinitarian theology and spirituality, Coakley explores the role of the Spirit in an illuminating way.

Coakley bases her analysis here on Romans 8:14–17; 26–7, which you should read before approaching the passage. This section of Paul's letter includes the following statement, which is of particular importance to Coakley's reflections: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." You might like to spend a few moments thinking about this passage before approaching Coakley's reflections on its implications for a theology of the Holy Spirit.

> What is being described in Paul is *one* experience of an activity of prayer that is nonetheless ineluctably, though obscurely, triadic. It is *one* experience of God, but God as simultaneously (i) doing the praying in me, (ii) receiving that prayer, and (iii) in that exchange, consented to in me, inviting me into the Christian life of redeemed sonship. Or to put it another way: the "Father" (so-called here) is both source and ultimate object of divine longing in us; the "Spirit" is that irreducibly – though obscurely – distinct enabler and incorporator of that longing in creation – that which *makes* the creation divine; and the "Son" is that divine and perfected creation, into whose life I, as prayer, am caught up. … As John of the Cross puts it in a lovely passage in *The Spiritual Canticle* (39.3.4), not coincidentally quoting Romans 8: "the Holy Spirit raises the soul most sublimely with that His divine breath … that she may breathe in God the same breath of love that the Father breathes in the Son and the Son in the Father."
>
> The Spirit, on this view, note, is no redundant third, no hypostatized afterthought, no cooing "feminine" adjunct to an established male household. Rather, experientially speaking, the Spirit is *primary,* just as Pentecost is primary for the church; and leaving noncluttered space for the Spirit is the absolute precondition for the unimpeded flowing of this divine exchange in us, the "breathing of the divine breath," as John of the Cross puts it.

The passage can be understood in a number of ways, but has a particular focus on the theological foundations and implications of prayer. Coakley emphasizes that Paul's statements about what happens in prayer are easily accommodated within a trinitarian or "triadic"

framework. Although these statements are not fully developed, they point towards a way of making sense of the activity and experience of prayer within a theological matrix. Although primarily concerned to reflect on the theme of "Living into the Mystery of the Holy Trinity," Coakley spends some time teasing out the distinctive identity and function of the Holy Spirit.

You may find the following questions helpful in interacting with this text, either on your own or in a group discussion.

1. Try to set out in your own words Coakley's analysis of the role of Father, Son, and Spirit in prayer. Why does she see this as being so important?
2. Coakley cites the sixteenth-century Spanish writer John of the Cross in developing her thesis about the role of the Spirit. What specific points does she draw out from his writings?
3. "The Spirit is *primary*." What does Coakley mean by this? What is the point of her allusion to the Day of Pentecost?

This chapter considered the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, so that all the basic building blocks of the Christian understanding of God are now in place. This leads us into the next chapter of this work, which deals with the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which weaves together the various strands of the Christian vision of God, including the basic themes discussed in the present chapter.

CHAPTER 7

Trinity

For many people, the doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most baffling areas of Christian theology. How can we think of God as "three persons"? There are many who suspect that this is simply an attempt by theologians to make their subject inaccessible to outsiders. Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826), third president of the United States of America, was severely critical of what he termed the "incomprehensible jargon of the Trinitarian arithmetic." Why on earth do we need to speak of God in this convoluted and puzzling way? Surely it suggests that theology is thoroughly irrational? More recently, Christians have become aware of the Islamic critique of the doctrine, which argues that it compromises the unity of God.

Furthermore, many Christians pay little attention to this doctrine, partly because it was seen to be obscure, but mainly because it seemed to be irrelevant. Karl Rahner remarked that modern Christians were "almost mere monotheists," paying lip service to the Trinity in theory, but ignoring it in practice. "We must be willing to admit," he remarked, "that, should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged."

Yet despite these difficulties, there has been a massive revival of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity in Christian theology in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The foundations of this revival of interest were laid by Karl Barth and others in the period before the Second World War. Since then, there has been a remarkable surge of interest in developing trinitarian approaches across the life and thought

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of the church. Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox alike have been involved in the exploration of the trinitarian geography of faith. The importance of this development was emphasized by the British theologian Colin Gunton (1941–2003), one of the most important recent advocates of the "promise of trinitarian theology":

> Because God is triune, we must respond to him in a particular way, or rather set of ways, corresponding to the richness of his being … In turn, that means that everything looks – and, indeed, is – different in the life of the Trinity.

Far from being a rather pointless piece of theological speculation, the doctrine of the Trinity is now seen as central to a distinctively and authentically Christian theological vision. As the American theologian Catherine Mowry LaCugna (1952–97) put it, "the shape of trinitarian doctrine is dictated by the pattern of redemption; everything comes from God, is made known and redeemed through Jesus Christ, and is consummated by the power of the Holy Spirit."

So what are the basic elements of the Christian vision of God that are formally set out in the doctrine of the Trinity? The three main elements are the following:

1. God created the world, establishing it with order and form.
2. God redeemed the world in Jesus Christ.
3. God is present in the world here and now, guiding and encouraging believers.

It is easy to set out a simple understanding of God which is able to incorporate one of these elements. For example, speaking of God as creator or lawgiver causes no fundamental intellectual problems. Yet this is only part of the Christian vision of God, which probably omits more than it affirms. The real task is to integrate these elements into a coherent and comprehensive doctrine of God. In this chapter, we shall consider some of the leading themes of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, beginning with some of its conceptual foundations.

The grounds of the doctrine of the Trinity

Why do Christians believe in the Trinity? Surely a simpler way of thinking and speaking about God would make things a lot easier? The
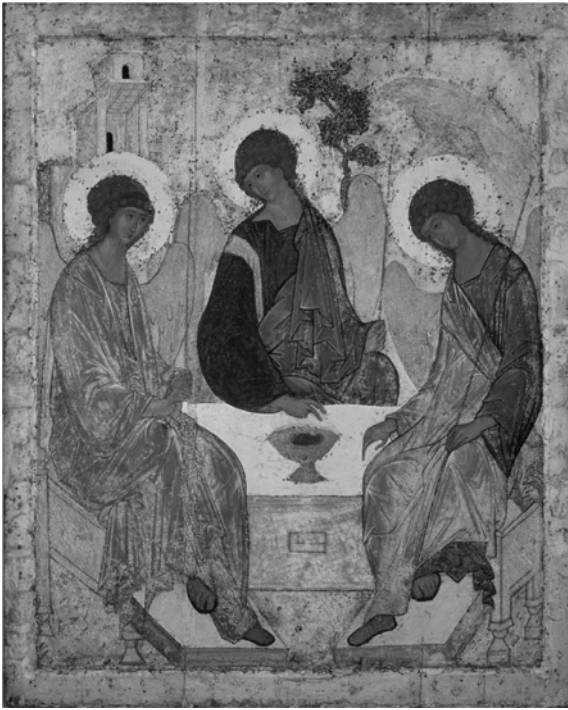
Figure 15   Andrei Rublev (1360–ca. 1430), *Holy Trinity*, icon. Tretyakov State Gallery, Moscow. Photo: Scala, Florence.

best way of understanding the basis of this seemingly baffling doctrine is to consider it as being the inevitable and legitimate way of thinking about God which emerges from a sustained engagement with the biblical witness to the words and works of God. The doctrine of the Trinity can be regarded as the result of reflection on the pattern of divine activity revealed in the Bible, and continued in Christian experience. This is not to say that the Bible contains or sets out an explicit doctrine of the Trinity; rather, it bears witness to a God who demands to be understood in a trinitarian manner.

At first sight, there are only two biblical verses which are open to a trinitarian interpretation: Matthew 28:19 and 2 Corinthians 13:14. The first commands the disciples to baptize people "in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit"; the second speaks of the Father, Son,

and Spirit in the familiar words of "the grace." Both these verses have become deeply rooted in the Christian consciousness, the former on account of its baptismal associations, and the latter through the common use of the formula in Christian prayer and devotion. Yet these two verses, taken together or in isolation, can hardly be thought of as constituting a doctrine of the Trinity.

The ultimate grounds of the doctrine of the Trinity do not lie in the two verses noted. Rather, the foundations of the doctrine are to be found in the overall pattern of divine activity to which the New Testament bears witness. The Father is revealed in Christ through the Spirit. There is the closest of connections between the Father, Son, and Spirit in the New Testament writings. Time after time, New Testament passages link together these three elements as part of a greater whole. The totality of God's saving presence and power can only, it would seem, be expressed by involving all three elements (for example, see 1 Corinthians 12:4–6; 2 Corinthians 1:21–2; Galatians 4:6; Ephesians 2:20–2; 2 Thessalonians 2:13–14; Titus 3:4–6; 1 Peter 1:2).

The best way of beginning to think about the doctrine of the Trinity is to think of the Christian Bible as setting out the nature and actions of one God – the god that Christians refer to as the "God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." While insisting that there is only one God, Christianity affirms a rich, complex vision of God, which is extremely difficult to put into words. Down the ages, Christian theologians have realized that they have two basic options here. They could set out a very simple concept of God, which is easily grasped – but fails to do justice to the profound and multifaceted witness to God found in the Bible, and then in Christian worship and experience. Or they could do their best to remain faithful to this witness to God – even though the end result was difficult to understand. Orthodox Christian theology has always adopted the second of these two courses. A quotation from Augustine of Hippo is often noted here: "If you can fully grasp it, it's not God."

This point was made by the Swiss Protestant theologian Emil Brunner (1889–1966), who argued that the Trinity was really a "protective doctrine," intended to safeguard the rich Christian understanding of God from well-meaning attempts to reduce or simplify it. The Trinity was not itself revealed in the Bible, but was the result of serious

reflection on what was implied by the biblical proclamation (Greek: *kerygma*).

> The doctrine of the Trinity is the product of reflection, and is not the *kerygma*. The *kerygma* is God revealed in Christ – Christ, the genuine revelation of God. The doctrine of the Trinity, however, is not itself biblical … but is the result of theological reflection upon the problem that is necessarily raised by the Christian *kerygma*.

The doctrine of the Trinity weaves together the strands of the Christian understanding of God, giving a vision of God which is faithful to the Christian experience of that God, even though it poses an intellectual challenge. Omitting anything may make the doctrine easier to understand – but it is a distorted, inaccurate, and inadequate representation of God, which fails to do justice to the way that God actually is. In the end, the doctrine of the Trinity can be seen as an admission that human words are simply inadequate to express the glory and wonder of God. The English theologian Charles Gore (1853–1932) made this point as follows:

> Human language never can express adequately divine realities. A constant tendency to apologize for human speech, a great element of agnosticism, an awful sense of unfathomed depths beyond the little that is made known, is always present to the mind of theologians who know what they are about, in conceiving or expressing God. "We see," says St. Paul, "in a mirror, in terms of a riddle"; "we know in part." "We are compelled," complains St. Hilary [of Poitiers], "to attempt what is unattainable, to climb where we cannot reach, to speak what we cannot utter; instead of the mere adoration of faith, we are compelled to entrust the deep things of religion to the perils of human expression."

The development of the doctrine of the Trinity

The starting point for Christian reflections on the Trinity is, as we have seen, the New Testament witness to the presence and activity of God in Christ and through the Spirit. For Irenaeus, the whole process of salvation, from its beginning to its end, bore witness to the action of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There was no question of compromising

the unity of God; the issue was to safeguard the richness of the Christian vision of God.

Irenaeus made use of a term which would feature prominently in future discussions of the Trinity: "the economy of salvation." The use of the term "economy" here needs a little explanation. The Greek word *oikonomia* basically means "the way in which one's affairs are ordered" (the relation to the modern sense of the word will thus be clear). For Irenaeus, the "economy of salvation" meant "the way in which the one God has ordered the salvation of humanity in history."

At the time, Irenaeus was under considerable pressure from Gnostic critics, who argued that the creator God was quite distinct from (and inferior to) the redeemer God (see chapter 3). Marcion of Sinope (ca. 110–60) argued that the Old Testament God was merely a creator God, and totally different from the redeemer God of the New Testament. As a result, Marcion argued, the Old Testament should be shunned by Christians, who should concentrate their attention upon the New Testament. Irenaeus vigorously rejected this idea. He insisted that the entire process of salvation, from the first moment of creation to the last moment of history, was the work of the one and the same God. There was a single economy of salvation, in which the one God – who was both creator and redeemer – could be seen at work to redeem the creation.

In his *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, Irenaeus insisted upon the distinct yet related roles of Father, Son, and Spirit within the economy of salvation. He affirmed his faith in:

> *God the Father uncreated*, who is uncontained, invisible, one God, creator of the universe; this is the first article of our faith. … And the *Word of God*, the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, … who, in the fullness of time, in order to gather all things to himself, he became a human being amongst human beings, capable of being seen and touched, to destroy death, bring life, and restore fellowship between God and humanity. And the *Holy Spirit*… who, in the fullness of time, was poured out in a new way on our human nature in order to renew humanity throughout the entire world in the sight of God.

This passage brings out clearly the idea of a Godhead in which each of the three persons is associated with an aspect of the economy of

salvation, even though every such aspect is ultimately to be seen as a work of the Godhead as a whole.

This point is often made using the Latin slogan *opera Trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt* ("the outward works of the Trinity are not divided"), found in the works of most Christian theologians of the fourth and fifth centuries, such as Augustine of Hippo. There is only one divine essence, which produces one, undivided operation or act – such as creation or redemption. Therefore, everything that one person of the Trinity does, has in fact all three persons involved in it, even if it may be "appropriate" or helpful to associate that act with one specific person of the Trinity. In the opening sections of his major treatise *On the Trinity*, Augustine summarizes the orthodox view on the Trinity in four basic points:

1. The inseparable equality of the three divine persons.
2. The real distinctions among the three divine persons.
3. The real distinction of the three persons in the economy of salvation.
4. The inseparable action of the divine persons in the economy of salvation.

An excessive focus on the "roles" or functions of the individual persons can tend towards tritheism – a tendency that is counterbalanced by insisting that whenever the Father works, the Son and Spirit are also working in the same act. For example, Augustine argues that creation can be thought of as the particular work of God the Father. Yet it is clear that creation is properly the work of the Trinity. After all, the book of Genesis spoke of God speaking a Word to bring creation into existence, while the Spirit hovered over the face of the deep. Did this not highlight the work of all three persons of the Trinity in the work of creation?

In the third century, Tertullian argued that God's action within the economy of salvation is complex, revealing both a *unity* and a *distinctiveness*. The doctrine of the Trinity thus affirms the unity of God, while recognizing the complexity and profundity of the Christian vision of God. Tertullian thus argues that *substance* is what unites the three aspects of the economy of salvation; *person* is what distinguishes them. The three persons of the Trinity are distinct, yet not divided (*distincti non divisi*), different yet not separate or independent of each other (*discreti*

non separati). The complexity of the human experience of redemption is thus the result of the three persons of the Godhead acting in distinct yet coordinated manners in human history, without any loss of the total unity of the Godhead.

The historical development of the doctrine of the Trinity was directly related to the evolution of Christology. If Christians should "think about Jesus as we do about God" (2 Clement 1:12), this has implications for the Christian understanding of Jesus Christ *and* of God. The more the church affirmed that Christ was God, the more it needed to clarify how Christ related to God.

The development of the doctrine of the Trinity took place in three stages, and was essentially complete by the end of the fourth century:

Stage 1: the recognition of the full divinity of Jesus Christ.
Stage 2: the recognition of the full divinity of the Spirit.
Stage 3: the definitive formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, affirming and clarifying these central insights, and determining their mutual relationship.

With the full recognition of the divinity of the Holy Spirit in the fourth century, the scene was set for the final development of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. This sequential development of the doctrine of the Trinity is acknowledged by Gregory of Nazianzus (329–89), who pointed to a gradual progress in clarification and understanding of the mystery of God's revelation in the course of time. It was, he argued, impossible to deal with the question of the divinity of the Spirit until the issue of the divinity of Christ had been settled.

> The Old Testament preached the Father openly and the Son more obscurely. The New Testament revealed the Son, and hinted at the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Now the Spirit dwells in us, and is revealed more clearly to us. It was not proper to preach the Son openly while the divinity of the Father had not yet been admitted. Nor was it proper to accept the Holy Spirit before [the divinity of] the Son had been acknowledged … Instead, by gradual advances and … partial ascents, we should move forward and increase in clarity, so that the light of the Trinity should shine.

Some contemporary accounts of the development of trinitarian doctrine still hold that there are significant differences between early "western" approaches to the doctrine, which emphasized the divine unity, and early "eastern" approaches, which emphasized a trinity of divine persons. Although this view was widely held throughout much of the twentieth century, scholarship has now shown that this simplistic account of the distinction between eastern and western views of the Trinity is problematic, and is probably best ignored.

A trinitarian heresy: modalism

The term "modalism" was introduced by the German historian of dogma Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930) to describe the common element of a group of trinitarian heresies associated with Noetus and Praxeas in the late second century, and Sabellius in the third. Each of these writers was concerned to safeguard the unity of the Godhead, fearing a lapse into some form of tritheism as a result of the doctrine of the Trinity.

This vigorous defense of the absolute unity of God (often referred to as "monarchianism," from the Greek word *monarchia*, meaning "a single principle of authority") led these writers to insist that the self-revelation of the one and only God took place in different ways at different times. The divinity of Christ and the Holy Spirit is to be explained in terms of three different ways or "modes" of divine self-revelation (hence the term "modalism"). This all too easily becomes an essentially unitarian notion of God whom we call Father, Son, or Spirit only because this one God self-discloses in three different modes or manners.

Although various forms of "modalism" have emerged within the Christian tradition over time, they are generally based upon much the same understandings of the dynamics of the Trinity:

1. The one God is revealed in the manner of creator and lawgiver. This aspect of God is referred to as "the Father."
2. The same God is also revealed in the manner of savior, in the person of Jesus Christ. This aspect of God is referred to as "the Son."

3. The same God is also revealed in the manner of the one who sanc-
    tifies and gives eternal life. This aspect of God is referred to as "the
    Spirit."

There is thus no fundamental difference between the three persons of
the Trinity, except for their appearance and chronological location.

Two main types of modalism should be noted: those which under-
stand the difference between the three persons in a *chronological* way,
and those which understand them in a *functional* way. It is important to
appreciate this distinction, as it is frequently encountered in theolog-
ical discussions. Chronological modalism holds that God appeared as
Father at one point in history; that God then appeared as Son at another
point; and finally, that God appeared as Spirit. God thus appears in dif-
ferent ways (or modes) at different times. The classic example of this
form of modalism is Sabellianism, which we will discuss in more detail.
Functional modalism, on the other hand, holds that God operates in
different ways at the present moment, and that the three persons refer
to these different modes of action.

Perhaps the most important trinitarian heresy is known as "Sabel-
lianism." Its main features were set out by Epiphanius of Constantia in
the late fourth century, as follows:

> Their doctrine is that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one and the same
> being, in the sense that three names are attached to one substance. It is
> just like the body, soul and spirit in a human being. The body is as it were
> the Father; the soul is the Son; while the Spirit is to the Godhead as his
> spirit is to a human being. Or it is like the sun, being one substance but
> having three manifestations: light, heat, and the orb itself. The heat … is
> analogous to the Spirit; the light to the Son; while the Father himself is
> represented by the essence of each substance. The Son was at one time
> emitted, like a ray of light; he accomplished in the world all that related
> to the dispensation of the gospel and the salvation of humanity, and was
> then taken back into heaven, as a ray is emitted by the sun and then
> withdrawn again into the sun. The Holy Spirit is still being sent forth
> into the world and into those individuals who are worthy to receive it.

It is clear from the analysis presented by Epiphanius that Sabellianism
is a form of chronological modalism. Its basic feature is the belief that
the one supreme God acts in different ways at different points in history.

In contrast, functional modalism designates the general belief that the same God acts in three different manners at any given point in history. The three persons of the Trinity thus designate different aspects of the activity of the one God. In its simplest forms, functional modalism could be set out as follows.

1. God the Father is the creator;
2. God the Son is the redeemer;
3. God the Holy Spirit is the sanctifier.

Here, the three persons of the Trinity are held to designate three actions of the one supreme God. God acts as creator (and we call this "Father"); God acts as redeemer (and we call this "Son"); God acts as sanctifier (and we call this the "Holy Spirit"). The persons of the Trinity thus refer to different divine functions. The approach to the doctrine of the Trinity set out by Karl Barth could be interpreted as a variant of this form of modalism, as it can be understood to mean that God operates in different ways in the present. Many Barth scholars, however, dispute this.

Visualizing the Trinity

As we have emphasized, the doctrine of the Trinity seems counterintuitive to many people. Partly, this difficulty arises from the problem of the *visualization* of the Trinity. How can we make sense of such a complex and abstract idea? How can we picture it in our minds? St. Patrick (ca. 391–ca. 461), the patron saint of Ireland, is rumored to have used the leaf of a shamrock to illustrate how a single leaf could have three different elements. Gregory of Nyssa uses a series of analogies in his letters to help his readers grasp the reality of the Trinity, including:

1. The analogy of a spring, fount and stream of water. The one flows from the other and they share the same substance – water. Although different aspects of the stream of water may be *distinguished*, they cannot be *separated*.
2. The analogy of a chain. There are many links in a chain; yet to be connected to one is to be connected to all of them. In the same

way, Gregory argues, someone who encounters the Holy Spirit also encounters the Father and the Son.
3. The analogy of a rainbow. Drawing on the Nicene statement that Christ is "light from light," Gregory argues that the rainbow allows us to distinguish and appreciate the different colors of a sunbeam. There is only one beam of light, yet the colors blend seamlessly into one another.

In what follows, we shall explore one more recent way of thinking about the Trinity which has proved very helpful to many. It is associated with the contemporary American theologian Robert Jenson (born 1930), and is set out in his work *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* (1982), and later works based on this.

The Trinity and the naming of God

To understand Jenson's approach, we may ask a simple question: who is the God of Israel? One answer might be that God is God; as there is no other god, there is nothing further to discuss. But remember that ancient Israel existed in a polytheistic context. There were many "gods." The God whom Israel knew and worshipped thus needed to be identified – to be *named*. The Old Testament declares that the God of Israel is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the God who led the people of Israel out of Egypt into the promised land with great signs and wonders. We thus identify and name God by telling the story of God.

You might do the same sort of thing when trying to identify a person. Your conversation with someone might go like this: "You know John Brown? You don't? Well, do you remember reading about a man who managed to row a boat all the way across the Atlantic Ocean about a year ago? The boat nearly sank at one point. And when he finished the journey, he wrote a book about it. Ah! You *do* know who I mean!" What you are doing here is telling a story which centers on John Brown. You are identifying him in this way. John Brown is the person at the center of the story. And so it is with God and the Old Testament. The Old Testament identifies God from the history of God's people – the great stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, of the exodus

from Egypt, and so on, are told in order to identify God. The God of Israel is the one who acted in this way.

This is made clear in a number of Old Testament passages (e.g., Exodus 19:4–5; Deuteronomy 26:5–9; Ezekiel 20:5–26). Question: who is God? Answer: God is the one who delivered Israel from Egypt. Of course, God has a name as well – a name which proves difficult to translate into English, "Yahweh," "the Lord," and "Jehovah" being three of the best-known translations. But the fact remains that God is usually thought of in terms of God's actions.

Now we turn to the God whom Christians worship and adore. Who is this God? To answer this question, the New Testament tells a story – perhaps the most famous story in the world – the story of Jesus Christ. And as that story reaches its climax in the account of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, we learn that God, for Christians, is the one who acted in this way to raise Jesus. Question: who is the God whom Christians worship and adore? Answer: whoever "raised Jesus our Lord from the dead" (Romans 4:24). Of course, the New Testament writers make it abundantly clear that the one who "raised Jesus our Lord from the dead" is the same God who delivered Israel from Egypt, thus affirming the continuity between the Old and New Testaments, between Israel and the church.

As Jenson points out, this approach can be taken further without difficulty. The resurrection of Jesus and the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost are treated as closely related by the New Testament. The complexity of the New Testament's statements concerning the relationship of God, Jesus, and the Spirit defies neat categorization. It is, however, clear that "God" is the one who raised Jesus from the dead, and is now present in the church through the Holy Spirit. In many ways, the Christian slogan "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:14) corresponds to the Old Testament slogan "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" – it *identifies* the God in question. Question: what God are you talking about? Answer: the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead, and is now present through the Spirit.

The trinitarian formula can thus be thought of as a *proper name* – a shorthand way of identifying exactly what God we are talking about. Christianity packs into this one neat phrase the high points of salvation history, the big moments (resurrection and Pentecost) when

God was so clearly present and active. It specifically links God with these events, just as Israel specifically linked God with the exodus from Egypt. It focuses our attention on certain specific events, in which God's presence and activity were to be found concentrated and publicly demonstrated.

The doctrine of the Trinity can thus be seen as a summary of the story of God's dealings with Israel and the church. It narrates the story of how God created and redeemed humanity, affirming that it is the story of the one and the same God throughout. If you were talking about a great modern statesperson, such as Winston Churchill or John F. Kennedy, you'd concentrate upon the high points of their careers – the moments when they stepped on to the stage of history, in order to change its direction. And the doctrine of the Trinity identifies those great moments in the history of salvation, when God was active and was seen to be active. It affirms that God is active in the world, that God is made known by God's actions, and points to the creation, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and Pentecost as turning points in God's dealings with us. The doctrine of the Trinity thus spells out exactly who the God we are dealing with actually is.

Jenson develops this approach in a fresh and helpful direction, offering a creative restatement of the traditional doctrine of the Trinity. In *The Triune Identity*, Jenson argues that "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" is the proper name for the God whom Christians know in and through Jesus Christ. It is imperative, he argues, that God should have a proper name. "Trinitarian discourse is Christianity's effort to identify the God who has claimed us. The doctrine of the Trinity comprises both a proper name, 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit' … and an elaborate development and analysis of corresponding identifying descriptions." Jenson points out that ancient Israel was set in a polytheistic context, in which the term "god" conveyed relatively little information. It was necessary to *name* the god in question. A similar situation was confronted by the writers of the New Testament, who were obliged to identify the god at the heart of their faith, and distinguish this god from the many other gods worshipped and acknowledged in the region, especially in Asia Minor.

The doctrine of the Trinity thus *identifies* and *names* the Christian God – but identifies and names this God in a manner consistent with the biblical witness. It is not a name which we have chosen; it is a name

which has been chosen for us, and which we are authorized to use. In this way, Jenson defends the priority of God's self-revelation against human constructions of concepts of divinity. "The gospel identifies its God thus: God is the one who raised Israel's Jesus from the dead. The whole task of theology can be described as the unpacking of this sentence in various ways. One of these produces the church's trinitarian language and thought." The doctrine of the Trinity, Jenson affirms, allows the church to discover the distinctiveness of its creed, and avoid becoming absorbed by rival conceptions of God.

The doctrine of the Trinity thus centers on the recognition that God is named by scripture, and within the witness of the church. Within the Hebraic tradition, God is identified by historical events. Jenson notes how many Old Testament texts identify God with reference to divine acts in history – such as the liberation of Israel from captivity in Egypt. The same pattern is evident in the New Testament: God is identified with reference to specific historical events, supremely the resurrection of Jesus Christ. God comes to be identified in relation to Jesus Christ. Who is God? Which god are we talking about? The God who raised Christ from the dead. As Jenson puts it, "the emergence of a semantic pattern in which the uses of 'God' and 'Jesus Christ' are mutually determining" is of fundamental importance within the New Testament.

> The gospel of the New Testament is the provision of a new identifying description for this same God [as that of Israel]. The coming-to-apply of this new description is the event, the witness to which is the whole point of the New Testament. God, in the gospel, is "whoever raised Jesus from the dead." Identification of God by the resurrection did not replace identification by the exodus; it is essential to the God who raised Jesus that he is the same one who freed Israel. But the new thing that is the content of the gospel is that God has now identified himself also as "him that raised from the dead Jesus our Lord" (Romans 4:24). In the New Testament such phrases become the standard way of referring to God.

Jenson thus recovers a personal conception of God from metaphysical speculation. "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" is a *proper name*, which we are asked to use in naming and addressing God. "Linguistic means of identification – proper names, identifying descriptions, or both – are

a necessity of religion. Prayers, like other requests and praises, must be addressed." The Trinity is thus an instrument of theological precision, which forces us to be explicit about the God under discussion. Christians do not believe in a generic god, but in a very specific God who is known in and through a series of actions in history.

Communicating the Trinity: hymns

Our discussion thus far may well have created the impression that the doctrine of the Trinity is highly inaccessible, having little to do with the realities of Christian life. Yet, as we noted earlier in this book, many theologians realized the importance of congregational hymns as a means of communicating theology to ordinary believers. For Charles Wesley (1707–88), hymns were not merely a means of praising God; they were an instrument of theological education. So what could be more natural than to try to set out the basic themes of the doctrine of the Trinity in the form of a hymn?

Figure 16   Charles Wesley preaching to the Indians in 1745, engraving. The Art Archive/Eileen Tweedy.

In 1746, Wesley published a collection of 24 short hymns concerning the Trinity. Individually and collectively, they manage to communicate and explain central trinitarian ideas without technical language or theological fuss. This is one of the most effective of these hymns:

> 1: Father of Mankind be ever ador'd:
>   Thy Mercy we find, In sending our Lord,
>   To ransom and bless us; Thy Goodness we praise,
>   For sending in Jesus' Salvation by Grace.
>
> 2: O Son of His Love, Who deignest to die,
>   Our Curse to remove, Our Pardon to buy;
>   Accept our Thanksgiving, Almighty to save,
>   Who openest Heaven, To all that believe.
>
> 3: O Spirit of Love, Of Health, and of Power,
>   Thy working we prove; Thy Grace we adore,
>   Whose inward Revealing applies our Lord's Blood,
>   Attesting and sealing us Children of God.

The hymn sets out the idea of the "economy of salvation" – the distinctively Christian understanding of the way in which salvation is effected in history. Wesley's concern is to identify its leading aspects, and show how the action of one and the same triune God can be seen in action throughout. Each person of the Trinity has its own distinctive role to play – a notion usually referred to as "appropriation." Every aspect of the great drama of redemption is shown to be interlocked. Father, Son, and Spirit are woven into this great tapestry of divine salvation in a continuous narrative. Although Wesley's theology needs a little elaboration at points, the fundamental purpose of the hymn is clear – to help congregations appreciate the manner in which the doctrine of the Trinity weaves together into a seamless garment the great threads of redemption.

The "social Trinity": Jürgen Moltmann

One of the most influential recent ways of understanding the doctrine of the Trinity and establish its relevance is a *social* understanding of

the Trinity. Advocates of this approach hold that Christians should not imagine God on the basis of a model of some individual person or thing which has three aspects, dimensions, or modes of being – for example, Patrick's image of the shamrock leaf, or Anselm of Canterbury's model of the River Nile as spring, river and lake (Anselm's knowledge of African geography was not very reliable!). Social approaches to the Trinity insist that God is instead to be thought of as a collective reality – a group, or a society, bound together by the mutual love, accord and self-giving of its members. Cornelius Plantinga, for example, spoke of the Trinity as "a zestful, wondrous community of divine light, love, joy, mutuality and verve."

In *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (1980), Jürgen Moltmann attempts to liberate the Christian doctrine of God from the confines both of the ancient Greek metaphysics of substance and of the modern metaphysics of transcendental subjectivity. Moltmann's analysis is of particular importance on account of its social doctrine of the Trinity, which emphasizes the relative independence of the person and work of the Holy Spirit in its community with the Father and the Son. Developing this in a way that might cause anxiety to some, Moltmann emphasizes that there is no fixed order in the Trinity. The unity of God is the unity of persons in relationship, as expressed in the Cappadocian doctrine of *perichoresis*. On this reading of this concept, Moltmann argues that "the trinitarian persons form their own unity by themselves in the circulation of the divine life."

Moltmann develops this point with reference to the notion of *perichoresis*. This Greek term (often translated as "mutual interpenetration") came into general use in the sixth century. It refers to the manner in which the three persons of the Trinity relate to one another. The concept of *perichoresis* allows the individuality of the persons to be maintained, while insisting that each person shares in the life of the other two. Moltmann's development of the idea proved particularly influential. The Trinity is to be conceived as "a community of being," in which each person, while maintaining its distinctive identity, penetrates the others and is penetrated by them.

This notion has important implications for Christian political thought, as the liberation theologian Leonardo Boff and other theologians concerned with political theology subsequently made clear. The mutual relationships among three coequal persons within the Godhead

have been argued to provide a model both for human relationships within communities and for Christian political and social theorizing.

The doctrine of *perichoresis*, according to Moltmann, "links together in a brilliant way the threeness and the unity, without reducing the threeness to the unity, or dissolving the unity in the threeness." Moltmann understands this *perichoresis* as a process by which each person of the Trinity, by virtue of their eternal mutual love, lives *in* the other two as a fellowship through a "process of most perfect and intense empathy." This conception of God is radically opposed, Moltmann insists, to any "monotheistic" or "monarchical" doctrine of God which would reduce the real subjectivity of the three persons. Of particular interest is how Moltmann uses this notion to develop a fundamentally theological understanding of human society.

"The trinity is our social program." For Moltmann, the doctrine of the Trinity is to be understood to provide a vision of God as a union of three divine persons or distinct, but related subjects. This specific understanding of God as a mutually loving, interacting, and sustaining society allows Christian theology to develop a theory of society. Moltmann therefore sees the social view of the Trinity as having both a theological and a social function: theologically, it offers a penetrating critique of a false idea of God; socially, it articulates a notion of God as a social being, capable of functioning as a proper paradigm for society as a whole.

> The triune God is reflected only in a united and uniting community of Christians without domination and subjection and a united and uniting humanity without class rule and without dictatorial oppression. That is the world in which people are defined by their social relationships and not by their power or their property. That is the world in which human beings have all things in common and share everything with one another except their personal qualities.

The idea of the "social Trinity" has been criticized by many theologians. The Catholic theologian Karen Kilby (born 1964), for example, points out that there is a "high level of projection" in these theories. What Kilby means by this is that ideas about what an individual theologian or society thinks a community should look like are projected onto God. In other words, social approaches to the Trinity run the risk

of projecting prevailing cultural values onto God, rather than reading normative social values out of God. Kilby argues that the doctrine of the Trinity cannot, and should not, be used in this way. It can too easily become a pretext for claiming insight into the nature of God that could be used to promote certain "social, political or ecclesiastical regimes."

Engaging with a text

Karl Barth is widely regarded as one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century, and is widely credited with the rediscovery of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity in recent decades. Barth's ideas on the Trinity are important for an understanding of recent theological debates. Unfortunately, they are a little difficult to grasp for those who are new to theology, and this section will therefore offer much more explanation than normal.

Barth's reflections on the Trinity are anchored in his fundamental belief that divine self-revelation has actually taken place. What, Barth asks towards the beginning of his *Church Dogmatics*, must be true, if God is able to be known in this way? Read this text slowly, and try to appreciate the issues Barth is raising.

> The question of the self-revealing God which thus forces itself upon us as the first question cannot, if we follow the witness of Scripture, be separated in any way from the second question: How does it come about, how is it actual, that this God reveals Himself? Nor can it be separated from the third question: What is the result? What does this event do to the person to whom it happens? Conversely the second and third questions cannot possibly be separated from the first … *God* reveals Himself. He reveals Himself *through Himself*. He reveals *Himself*. If we really want to understand revelation in terms of its subject, i.e., God, then the first thing that we have to realize is that this subject, God, the revealer, is identical with His act in revelation, and also with its effect. It is from this fact, which in the first instance we are merely indicating, that we learn we must begin the doctrine of revelation with the doctrine of the triune God.

"*God* reveals Himself. He reveals Himself *through Himself*. He reveals *Himself*." With these words (which are very difficult to translate into

inclusive English) Barth sets up the revelational framework which leads to the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity. Barth often quotes the Latin phrase *Deus dixit!* – "God has spoken" – in his discussion of revelation. For Barth, God *has* spoken, and it is the task of theology to inquire concerning what this revelation presupposes and implies. For Barth, theology is a process of "thinking afterwards" about what is contained in God's self-revelation. We have to "inquire carefully into the relation between our knowing of God, and God himself in his being and nature."

With such statements, Barth sets up the context of the doctrine of the Trinity: given that God's self-revelation has taken place, what must be true of God if this can have happened? What does the actuality of revelation have to tell us about the being of God? Barth's starting point for his discussion of the Trinity is not a doctrine or an idea, but the actuality of God's speaking and God's being heard. For how can God be heard, when sinful humanity is incapable of hearing the Word of God?

The above is simply a paraphrase of sections of the first half-volume of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, entitled "The Doctrine of the Word of God," punctuated by occasional quotations. There is an enormous amount being said in this, and it requires unpacking. Two themes need to be carefully noted.

1. Sinful humanity is fundamentally incapable of hearing the Word of God.
2. Nevertheless, sinful humanity has heard the Word of God, in that this Word makes its sinfulness known to it.

The very fact that revelation takes place thus requires explanation. For Barth, this implies that humanity is passive in the process of reception; the process of revelation is, from its beginning to its end, subject to the sovereignty of God as Lord. For revelation to *be* revelation, God must be capable of effecting self-revelation to sinful humanity, despite its sinfulness.

Once this paradox has been appreciated, the general structure of Barth's doctrine of the Trinity can be followed. In revelation, Barth argues, God must be as shown in the divine self-revelation. There must be a direct correspondence between the revealer and the revelation. If "God reveals himself as Lord" (a characteristically Barthian assertion),

then God must be Lord "antecedently in himself." Revelation is the reiteration in time of what God actually is in eternity. There is thus a direct correspondence between:

1. the revealing God;
2. the self-revelation of God.

To put this in the language of trinitarian theology, the Father is revealed in the Son.

So what about the Spirit? Here we come to what is perhaps the most difficult aspect of Barth's doctrine of the Trinity: the idea of "revealed-ness" (*Offenbarsein*). To explore this, we will have to use an illustration not used by Barth himself. Imagine two individuals walking outside Jerusalem on a spring day around the year AD 30. They see three men being crucified, and pause to watch. The first points to the central figure, and says, "There is a common criminal being executed." The second, pointing to the same man, replies, "There is the Son of God dying for me." To say that Jesus is the self-revelation of God will not do in itself; there must be some means by which Jesus is *recognized* as the self-revelation of God. It is this recognition of revelation *as* revelation that constitutes the idea of *Offenbarsein*.

How is this insight achieved? Barth is quite clear: sinful humanity is not capable of reaching this insight unaided. Barth is not prepared to allow humanity any positive role in the interpretation of revelation, believing that this is to subject divine revelation to human theories of knowledge. The recognition of revelation *as* revelation must itself be the work of God – more accurately, the work of the Spirit. Humanity does not become capable of hearing the word of the Lord (*capax verbi domini*), and then act in response to having heard that word; both the hearing and capacity to hear are given in the one act by the Spirit.

Barth's achievement was to demonstrate that the concepts of revelation and the Trinity were so completely interlocked and interwoven that neither could be affirmed without the other. To believe in a revealing God is implicitly to believe in a Trinitarian conception of God, which it is the task of theology to unfold and explore. For Barth, the doctrine of the Trinity is thus presupposed by the entire project of Christian theology. While many would express reservations at aspects

of his approach, few would deny that Barth's achievement represents a massive theological landmark.

You may find the following questions helpful in interacting with this text, either on your own or in a group discussion.

1. Try to set out in your own words the argument that links the actuality of revelation with the doctrine of the Trinity.
2. Try to answer this hypothetical question. Has revelation taken place if we do not recognize it as revelation? You might like to use the earlier example of the two individuals who see the scene of the crucifixion.
3. On the basis of the passage from the *Church Dogmatics* reproduced in this section, set out how Barth understands Father, Son, and Spirit to be involved in the process of divine revelation. You might like to reproduce Barth's own discussion, and then restate this in your own words.

Having reflected on the doctrine of God in chapters 6 and 7, our attention now shifts to Christian understandings of the church and its sacraments. Although these areas of theology are often seen as being particularly important for those studying theology to enter Christian ministry, they are fascinating areas in their own right. We begin with the area of theology generally known as "ecclesiology" – the doctrine of the church.

CHAPTER 8

Church

The Nicene Creed affirms that Christians believe in "one holy, catholic and apostolic church." So what is meant by this? How is the church to be defined, and what is its purpose? This area of theology is traditionally designated "ecclesiology" (from the Greek word for "church," *ekklesia*). It is one of the more sensitive areas of theology, as it raises awkward denominational questions which are of central importance to the identity of churches. In this chapter, we shall explore a number of aspects of the doctrine of the church. As always, limits on space restrict the extent to which certain ideas can be discussed, and prevent us from looking at some issues which are of considerable interest.

The church: local or universal?

The New Testament uses the word "church" in two somewhat different manners. At many points, the term "church" is used to designate individual Christian congregations – local visible gatherings of believers. For example, Paul wrote letters to churches in the cities of Corinth and Philippi. The book of Revelation makes reference to the "seven churches of Asia," probably meaning seven local Christian communities in Asia Minor (a region of the Roman empire which is located within modern-day Turkey). Yet, at other points, we find the term being used in a wider, more general sense, meaning something like "the total body

of Christian believers." The tension between the local and universal senses of the word "church" is of considerable importance, and needs careful examination. How could both aspects be maintained?

Traditionally, this tension is resolved through arguing that there is one, universal church which exists in local communities. On the basis of this approach, there is one universal church, consisting of all Christian believers, which takes the form of individual local churches in a given region. One influential way of conceiving this distinction is due to John Calvin, who drew an important distinction between the *visible* and the *invisible* church. At one level, the church is the community of Christian believers, a visible group. It is also, however, the fellowship of saints and the company of the elect – an *invisible* entity.

For Calvin, the distinction between the invisible and visible churches is basically eschatological (that is, to do with the end times). The invisible church is the church which will come into being at the end of time, as God ushers in the final judgment of humanity. The relation between the visible and invisible churches can be summarized as in the box.

Visible church	Invisible church
The church is the observable community of believers on earth	The church is the assembly of the elect, known only to God
The church is an object of present experience	The church is an object of present faith and future hope
The church includes both good and evil, elect and reprobate	The church consists only of the elect

Calvin's ideas were given more formal expression in the Westminster Confession of Faith, a document which has had considerable influence in Puritan and Reformed church circles:

> The catholic or universal church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof … The visible church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children.

The importance of this model, and others like it, is best appreciated by considering the following question. How can we talk about "one" Christian church, when there are so many different Christian denominations?

Only one church?

Faced with this apparent tension between a theoretical belief in "one church" and the brute observable reality of a plurality of churches, Christian writers developed approaches to allow the later observation to be incorporated within the framework of the former. Four major approaches to the issue of the unity of the church may be noted, each of which possesses distinctive strengths and weaknesses:

1. An *imperialist* approach, which declares that there is only one empirical – that is, observable – church which deserves to be known and treated as the true church. All others are fraudulent pretenders to this title, or are at best little more than approximations to the real thing. This position was maintained by the Roman Catholic church prior to the Second Vatican Council (1962–5), which took the momentous step of recognizing other Christian churches as "separated" Christian brothers and sisters.

2. A *Platonic* approach, which draws a fundamental distinction between the empirical church (that is, the church as a visible historical reality) and the ideal church. This has found relatively little support in mainstream Christian theology, although some scholars have suggested that some such idea may lie behind Calvin's distinction between the "visible" and "invisible" church. However, as we noted, this is better interpreted along eschatological lines.

3. An *eschatological* approach, which suggests that the present disunity of the church will be abolished on the last day. The present situation is temporary, and will be resolved on the day of judgment. This understanding lies behind Calvin's distinction between the "visible" and "invisible" churches, which we considered earlier.

4. A *biological* approach, which likens the historical evolution of the church to the development of the branches of a tree. This image, developed by the eighteenth-century German Pietist writer Nikolaus von

Zinzendorf (1700–60), and taken up with enthusiasm by Anglican writers of the following century, allows the different empirical churches (e.g., the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican churches) to be seen as possessing an organic unity, despite their institutional differences.

In recent years, many theologians concerned with ecumenism (deriving from the Greek word *oecumene*, "the whole world," and now generally understood to mean "the movement concerned with the fostering of Christian unity") argued that the true basis of the "unity of the church" required to be recovered, after centuries of distortion. The maxim *ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia* ("where Christ is, there is also the church"), which derives from Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 50–ca. 107), pointed to the unity of the church lying in Christ, rather than in any historical or cultural factor. The New Testament does not even suggest that the diversity of local churches poses any threat to, or is inconsistent with, the unity of the church. The church already possesses a unity through its common calling from God, which expresses itself in different communities in different cultures and situations.

Figure 17 Hans Küng (born 1928). Sean Gallup/Getty Images.

It therefore follows that "unity" must not be understood *sociologically* or *organizationally*, but *theologically*. As the Roman Catholic theologian Hans Küng (born 1928) argued in his magisterial study *The Church*:

> The unity of the church is a spiritual entity. It is one and the same God who gathers the scattered from all places and all ages and makes them into one people of God. It is one and the same Christ who through his word and Spirit unites all together in the same bond of fellowship of the same body of Christ … The Church *is* one, and therefore *should be* one.

Küng's point is that the unity of the church is grounded in the saving work of God in Christ. This is in no way inconsistent with that

one church adapting itself to local cultural conditions, leading to the formation of local churches. As Küng goes on to say:

> The unity of the church presupposes a multiplicity of churches; the various churches do not need to deny their origins or their specific situations; their language, their history, their customs and traditions, their way of life and thought, their personal structure will differ fundamentally, and no one has the right to take this from them. The same thing is not suitable for everyone, at every time, and in every place.

Discussion of the universality of the church has often focused on the idea of "catholicity," which needs more detailed explanation.

The catholicity of the church

In modern English, the term "catholic" is often confused, especially in non-religious circles, with "Roman Catholic" – that is, the branch of Christianity that accepts the authority of the pope, and places particular emphasis on historical and institutional continuity between the present-day church and that of the period of the apostles. Although this confusion is understandable, it must be pointed out that it is not only Roman Catholics who are "catholic," just as it is by no means only Eastern Orthodox writers who are "orthodox" in their theology. Indeed, many Protestant churches have replaced the term "catholic" with the more familiar word "universal," arguing that this brings greater intelligibility to belief in "one holy universal and apostolic church."

The term "catholic" derives from the Greek phrase *kath' holou* ("referring to the whole"). The Greek word *katholikos* (the root of the Latin word *catholicus*) came to have the meaning "universal," "comprehensive," or "general." This sense of the word is retained in the English phrase "catholic taste," meaning a "wide-ranging taste" rather than a "taste for things that are Roman Catholic." Older versions of the English Bible often refer to some of the New Testament letters (such as those of James and John) as "catholic epistles," meaning that they are directed to all Christians (rather than those of Paul, which are directed to the needs and situations of individual identified churches, such as those at Rome or Corinth).

The developed sense of the word is perhaps best seen in the fourth–century catechetical writings of Cyril of Jerusalem (ca. 315–86). In his eighteenth catechetical lecture, Cyril teases out a number of senses of the word "catholic":

> The church is thus called "catholic" because it is spread throughout the entire inhabited world, from one end to the other, and because it teaches in its totality [*katholikos*] and without leaving anything out every doctrine which people need to know relating to things visible and invisible, whether in heaven and earth. It is also called "catholic" because it brings to obedience every sort of person – whether rulers or their subjects, the educated and the unlearned. It also makes available a universal [*katholikos*] remedy and cure to every kind of sin.

It will be clear that Cyril is using the term "catholic" in four ways, each of which deserves comment.

1. "Catholic" is to be understood as "spread throughout the entire inhabited world." Here, Cyril notes the geographical sense of the word. The notion of "wholeness" or "universality" is thus understood to mandate the church to spread into every region of the world.

2. "Catholic" means "without leaving anything out." With this phrase, Cyril stresses that the "catholicity" of the church involves the complete proclamation and explanation of the Christian faith. It is an invitation to ensure that the totality of the gospel is preached and taught.

3. "Catholic" means that the church extends its mission and ministry to "every sort of person." Cyril here makes an essentially sociological point. The gospel and the church are for all kinds of human beings, irrespective of their race, gender, or social status. We can see here a clear echo of St. Paul's famous declaration that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

4. "Catholic" means that the church offers and proclaims "a universal remedy and cure to every kind of sin." Here, Cyril makes a soteriological statement: the gospel, and the church which proclaims that gospel, can meet every human need and distress. Whatever sins there may be, the church is able to offer an antidote.

The various senses of the term "catholic" are also brought out clearly by Thomas Aquinas, in his discussion of the section of the Apostles'

Creed dealing with the doctrine of the church. In this analysis, Aquinas singles out three essential aspects of the idea of "catholicity."

> The church is catholic, i.e., universal, first with respect to place, because it is throughout the entire world [*per totum mundum*], against the Donatists. See Romans 1:8: "Your faith is proclaimed in all the world"; Mark 16:15: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation." … Secondly, the church is universal with respect to the condition of people, because no one is rejected, whether master or slave, male or female. See Galatians 3:28: "There is neither male nor female." Thirdly, it is universal with respect to time. For some have said that the church should last until a certain time, but this is false, because this church began from the time of Abel and will last to the end of the world. See Matthew 28:20: "And I am with you always, to the close of the age." And after the close of the age it will remain in heaven.

Note how catholicity is here understood in terms of geographical, anthropological, and chronological universality.

The church: holy or just human?

One of the most interesting debates concerning the doctrine of the church concerns whether its members are required to be holy. The debate is seen at its most intense during the Donatist controversy of the fourth century, which focused on the question of whether church leaders were required to be morally pure. Under the Roman emperor Diocletian (284–313), the Christian church was subject to various degrees of persecution. The origins of the persecution date from 303; it finally ended with the conversion of Constantine, and the issuing of the Edict of Milan in 313. Under an edict of February 303, Christian books were ordered to be burned and churches demolished. Those Christian leaders who handed over their books to be burned came to be known as *traditores* – "those who handed over [their books]." The modern word "traitor" derives from the same root. One such *traditor* was Felix of Aptunga, who later consecrated Caecilian as bishop of the great North African city of Carthage in 311.

Many local Christians were outraged that such a person should have been allowed to be involved in this consecration, and declared that they

could not accept the authority of Caecilian as a result. The new bishop's authority was compromised, it was argued, on account of the fact that the bishop who had consecrated him had lapsed under the pressure of persecution. The hierarchy of the Catholic church was thus tainted as a result of this development. The church ought to be pure, and should not be permitted to include such people. By the time Augustine – destined to be a central figure in the controversy – returned to North Africa from Rome in 388, a breakaway faction had established itself as the leading Christian body in the region, with especially strong support from the local African population.

The Donatists believed that the entire sacramental system of the Catholic church had become corrupted on account of the lapse of its leaders. How could the sacraments be validly administered by people who were tainted in this way? Surely the purity of the sacraments were contaminated by the moral failings of those who administered them? It was therefore necessary to replace these people with more acceptable leaders, who had remained firm in their faith under persecution. It was also necessary to rebaptize and re-ordain all those who had been baptized and ordained by those who had lapsed. Inevitably, this resulted in the formation of a breakaway faction. By the time Augustine returned to Africa, the breakaway faction was larger than the church from which it had originally broken away.

Augustine responded by putting forward a theory of the church which he believed was more firmly grounded in the New Testament than the Donatist teaching. In particular, Augustine emphasized the *sinfulness of Christians*. The church is not meant to be a "pure body," a society of saints, but a "mixed body" (*corpus permixtum*) of saints and sinners. Augustine finds this image in two biblical parables: the parable of the net which catches many fishes, and the parable of the wheat and the weeds (or "tares," to use an older word familiar to readers of the King James Bible). It is this latter parable (Matthew 13:24–31) which is of especial importance, and requires further discussion.

The parable tells of a farmer who sowed seed, and discovered that the resulting crop included both wheat and weeds. What could be done about it? To attempt to separate the wheat and the weeds while both were still growing would be to court disaster, probably involving damaging the wheat while trying to get rid of the weeds. But at the harvest, all the plants – whether wheat or weeds – are cut down and

Figure 18   Augustine of Hippo by Benozzo Gozzoli, 1465, fresco. Museo Civico San Gimignano. The Art Archive/Museo Civico San Gimignano/Gianni Dagli Orti.

sorted out, thus avoiding damaging the wheat. The separation of the good and the evil thus takes place at the end of time, not in history.

For Augustine, this parable refers to the church in the world. It must expect to find itself including both saints and sinners. To attempt a separation in this world is premature and improper. That separation will take place in God's own time, at the end of history. No human can make that judgment or separation in God's place.

So in what sense is the church holy? For Augustine, the holiness in question is not that of its members, but of Christ. The church cannot be a congregation of saints in this world, in that its members are contaminated with original sin. However, the church is sanctified and made holy by Christ – a holiness which will be perfected and finally realized at the last judgment. In addition to this theological analysis, Augustine makes the practical observation that the Donatists failed to live up to their own high standards of morality. The Donatists, Augustine

suggests, were just as capable as Catholics of getting drunk or beating people up.

Yet the Donatist vision of a "pure body" remains attractive to many. As is so often the case with theological debates, the evidence is never entirely on one side of the argument. A strong case continues to be made for the idea of the church as a "pure body," especially in denominations which trace their identity back to the more radical wing of the Protestant Reformation, often known as "Anabaptism." The radical Reformation conceived of the church as an "alternative society" within the mainstream of sixteenth-century European culture.

For the radical Protestant writer and church leader Menno Simons (1492–1559), the church was "an assembly of the righteous," at odds with the world, and not a "mixed body," as Augustine argued:

> In truth, those who merely boast of his name are not the true congregation of Christ. The true congregation of Christ is those who are truly converted, who are born from above of God, who are of a regenerate mind by the operation of the Holy Spirit through the hearing of the Word of God, and have become the children of God.

It will be clear that there are strong parallels with the Donatist view of the church as a holy and pure body, isolated from the corrupting influences of the world, and prepared to maintain its purity and distinctiveness by whatever disciplinary means proved necessary.

Anabaptism maintained discipline within its communities through "the ban" – a means by which church members could be excluded from Anabaptist congregations. This means of discipline was regarded as essential to the identity of a true church. Part of the Anabaptist case for radical separation from the mainstream churches (a practice which continues to this day among the Amish of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania) was the failure of those churches to maintain proper discipline within their ranks. The Schleitheim Confession (1527) grounded its doctrine of the "ban" on Christ's words, as they are recorded in Matthew 18:15–20:

> The ban shall be used in the case of all those who have given themselves to the Lord, to walk in his commandments, and with all those who are baptized into the one body of Christ and are called brothers or sisters, yet who lapse on occasion, and inadvertently fall into error and sin. Such

people shall be admonished twice in secret, and on the third occasion, they shall be disciplined publicly, or banned according to the command of Christ (Matthew 18).

The "ban" was seen as being both deterrent and remedial in its effects, providing both an incentive for banned individuals to amend their way of life and a disincentive for others to imitate them in their sin. The Polish Racovian Catechism (1605) lists five reasons for maintaining rigorous discipline within Anabaptist communities, most of which reflect its policy of radical separation:

1. So that the fallen church member may be healed, and brought back into fellowship with the church.
2. To deter others from committing the same offense.
3. To eliminate scandal and disorder from the church.
4. To prevent the word of the Lord falling into disrepute outside the congregation.
5. To prevent the glory of the Lord being profaned.

Despite its pastoral intentions, the "ban" often came to be interpreted harshly, with congregation members often avoiding all social contact (known as "shunning") with both the banned individual and his or her family.

Other writers have pointed out how the term "holy" is often equated with "morality," "sanctity," or "purity," which often seem to bear little relation to the behavior of fallen human beings. Yet the Hebrew term *kadosh*, which underlies the New Testament concept of "holiness," has a rather different meaning, bearing the sense of "being cut off," or "being separated." There are strong overtones of *dedication*: to be "holy" is to be set apart for and dedicated to the service of God.

A fundamental element – indeed, perhaps *the* fundamental element – of the Old Testament idea of holiness is that of "something or someone whom God has set apart." The New Testament restricts the idea almost entirely to personal holiness. It refers the idea to individuals, declining to pick up the idea of "holy places" or "holy things." People are "holy" in that they are dedicated to God, and distinguished from the world on account of their calling by God. A number of theologians have suggested a correlation between the idea of "the church" (the Greek word for which can bear the meaning of "those who are called out")

and "holy" (that is, those who have been separated from the world, on account of their having been called by God).

To speak of the "holiness of the church" is thus primarily to speak of the holiness of the one who called that church and its members. The church has been separated from the world, in order to bear witness to the grace and salvation of God. In this sense, there are obvious connections between the church being "holy" and the church being "apostolic." The term "holy" is theological, not moral, in its connotations, affirming the calling of the church and its members, and the hope that the church will one day share in the life and glory of God.

So if the church is not defined by holiness, what is its distinguishing feature? A number of responses have been offered to this question, and we shall consider one of them in what follows.

The church as constituted by the Word of God

It will be clear from our discussion thus far that Christian theologians insist that the term "church" is to be defined theologically, not sociologically. To "believe in the church" is not to trust in the institution of the church, but to affirm that the church is ultimately called into being by God, with a mission and authorization which derives from God. A central theme of Protestant understanding of the nature and mission of the church focuses on the presence of Christ resulting from the proclamation of the "Word of God," in preaching and the sacraments. For Martin Luther, the church is the community called into being by the preaching of God's Word:

> Now, anywhere you hear or see [the Word of God] preached, believed, confessed, and acted upon, do not doubt that the true holy catholic church, a "holy Christian people" must be there, even though there are very few of them. For God's word "shall not return empty" (Isaiah 55:11), but must possess at least a fourth or a part of the field. And even if there were no other sign than this alone, it would be enough to prove that a holy Christian people must exist there, for God's word cannot be without God's people and conversely, God's people cannot be without God's word. For who would preach the word, or hear it preached, if there were no people of God? And what could or would God's people believe, if there were no Word of God?

Luther thus concludes that an episcopally ordained ministry is therefore not actually necessary to safeguard the existence of the church. What really matters is the preaching of the gospel, which Luther holds to be essential to the identity of that church. "Where the word is, there is faith; and where faith is, there is the true church." The visible church is constituted and upheld by the preaching of the Word of God. No human assembly may claim to be the "church of God" unless it is founded on this gospel. It is more important to preach the same gospel as the apostles than to be a member of an institution which is historically derived from them.

John Calvin took a similar line, again stressing the importance of the proclamation of God's word as definitive of the identity of a church.

> Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and listened to, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, it is in no way to be doubted that a church of God exists. For his promise cannot fail: "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20) … If the ministry has the Word and honors it, if it has the administration of the sacraments, it deserves without doubt to be held and considered a church.

For Calvin, the preaching of the word and right administration of the sacrament are linked with the presence of Christ – and wherever Christ is, there his church is to be found as well.

This theme continued to be of major importance in the twentieth century, particularly in the writings of Karl Barth. For Barth, the church is the community which comes into being in response to the preaching of the Word of God. The church is seen as a community which proclaims the good news of what God has done for humanity in Christ, and which comes into being wherever the Word of God is faithfully proclaimed and accepted.

As Barth put it in his 1948 address to the World Council of Churches, the church consists of "the gathering together [*congregatio*] of those men and women [*fidelium*] whom the living Lord Jesus Christ chooses and calls to be witnesses of the victory he has already won, and heralds of its future manifestation." Barth's ecclesiology is thoroughly trinitarian at this point, involving Father, Son, and Spirit in a dynamic understanding of the nature of the church. For Barth, the church is not an extension of Christ, but is united with Christ, and called and

commissioned by him to serve the world. Christ is present within his church, through the Holy Spirit.

The role of the Holy Spirit is particularly important. Although it would not be correct to say that Barth has a "charismatic" understanding of the church, his Christological approach to the identity of the church allocates a definite and distinctive role to the Holy Spirit, which Barth summarized as follows in his *Dogmatics in Outline*:

> *Credo ecclesiam* ["I believe in the church"] means that I believe that here, at this place, in this assembly, the work of the Holy Spirit takes place. By that is not intended a deification of the creature; the church is not the object of faith, we do not believe *in* the church; but we do believe that in this congregation the work of the Holy Spirit becomes an event.

The church is thus seen as an event, not an institution. Barth does not identify the Holy Spirit with the church, nor limit the operation of the Spirit to the bounds of the institution of the church. He argues that the Spirit empowers and renews the church, unites it with Christ's redemptive work on the cross, and is the means by which the risen Christ is made present to the people of God. In this way, the Spirit safeguards the church from lapsing into purely secular ways of understanding its identity and mission.

For many Protestant theologians, the key concept of "apostolicity" means *conforming to the teaching of the apostles* – in other words, maintaining doctrinal continuity with the apostles through grounding belief and practice in scripture. Others, however, would place the emphasis elsewhere. Many Catholic theologians, for example, would argue that *institutional continuity* is essential to the identity of the church. More radical Protestant voices, especially within Anabaptism, argued that it was essential to include discipline in any definition of the church. How else could the purity and distinctiveness of the church be maintained?

Pure or mixed body: what difference does it make?

Earlier in this chapter, we explored two rather different understandings of the observable or "empirical" church. One of these argues that the church is a "mixed body" of saints and sinners; the other that the church

is (or ought to be) a pure body. So what difference does this make to ministry? How does theology impact on practice? We may note some points briefly.

A pure-body ecclesiology assumes that the members of the church are doctrinally and morally pure. It is therefore able to assume a very high level of commitment on their part. Evangelism is something that church members do outside the church. Preaching is primarily about deepening their knowledge of their faith, and encouraging them in their social and personal responsibilities as believers. For the same reason, such ecclesiologies often lead to an emphasis being placed on discipline. If a church is defined by doctrinal and moral purity, there must be means of enforcing this purity – otherwise, the existence and integrity of the church is called into question. Earlier, we noted the "ban" as a means of securing this discipline; other approaches are, of course, possible.

A mixed-body ecclesiology must assume much less commitment on the part of its members. Evangelism is now something that must be done within the congregation itself. Preaching may take the form of encouraging congregational members in their social and personal responsibilities as believers; it must also, however, deal with the fact that some members will not be converted. Correspondingly, a lesser degree of commitment can be expected from the congregation as a whole, even though many individual members will be very committed to their faith. Since this ecclesiology does not demand moral or doctrinal purity on the part of its members, there is no need for means of enforcing this within the congregation. Most churches adopting this ecclesiology demand such purity from their ministers, but not from their members.

Ministry within the church: the Second Vatican Council

So what of ministry within the church? What theological defense might be offered for the existence of a distinct priestly order within the church? And how does this relate to the laity as a whole? In the western medieval church, a well-defined hierarchical model of ministry developed which placed particular emphasis upon the priest as the

alter Christus ("other Christ") whose task was to represent Christ to the people of God, especially through the sacraments. A sharp distinction was recognized between the "sacred" and "secular." On ordination, a priest was distinguished from lay believers by an "indelible character," bestowed upon him by virtue of the sacrament of ordination.

This view was challenged by the rise of the Reformation, which sought to abolish the distinction between the sacred and secular. (Although some historians represent early Protestantism as eliminating the sacred, it is perhaps more accurate to suggest that the movement sacralized the secular.) The basic distinction between the sacramentally ordained priesthood and the universal priesthood of the laity was denied. Furthermore, the cultic aspect of priesthood was replaced by a new emphasis on the priest as one entrusted with the ministry of the Word. The Protestant rejection of the hierarchical structure of the priesthood and the jurisdiction derived from it led it to argue that its ministers should be elected by the church community.

Martin Luther argued for the abolition of any distinction between a sacramentally ordained priesthood and the universal priesthood of the laity. Every believer, Luther argued, shared in the corporate priesthood of the people of God by virtue of their baptism. Every believer was a priest; but not every believer was called to exercise the "office and work" of a priest. For Luther, ordained clergy were essentially office-holders, who were elected (and could be removed from office) by the local congregation.

The Council of Trent responded by reaffirming the hierarchical nature of offices within the church, and insisted that these were endowed with a specific spiritual jurisdiction. Responding to Protestant denials of the idea of a "priestly character" that was conferred on an individual through sacramental ordination, Trent reemphasized the link between priestly authority and the role of the priest as *alter Christus* in offering the sacrifice of the Mass. The celebration of the Mass was thus seen as the key to a priest's distinct role and identity, with the church being understood primarily as a hierarchical structure with governing authority.

This model was reinforced by the First Vatican Council, which insisted that the church of Christ is not a community of equals in which all the faithful have the same rights. It is a society of unequals, some of whom are clergy and some of whom are laity. This was

often expressed in terms of the distinction between *ecclesia docens* ("the teaching church," referring to the hierarchy) and *ecclesia discens* ("the learning church," referring to the laity, whose responsibilities were primarily to obey their superiors).

Yet, by the middle of the twentieth century, many Catholic theologians believed that at least some reconsideration of this matter was necessary. Yves Congar (1904–95) and others laid the groundwork for the recovery of a theology of the laity, who they believed had been marginalized in traditional institutional models of the church. (Congar once asked this question: "What is the position of the laity in the church?" His answer? They kneel before the altar, sit under the pulpit, and put their hands in their wallets.) Prophetically, as it proved, Congar declared that the reappropriation or development of a theology of the laity would lead to far more than some minor adjustments of inherited ecclesiological views; it would lead to a reorientation of the whole vision of what it meant to be a Christian church.

The Second Vatican Council reviewed this question, and in doing so, opened up a highly creative theological discussion of the relation between priests and laity. The document normally referred to as the "Dogmatic Constitution of the Church" (occasionally referred to by the Latin title *Lumen Gentium*) reaffirmed the basic relationship between ministerial priesthood and the common or universal priesthood of the laity. The church has received a unique mission from Jesus Christ, which is entrusted to all the members of the people of God – not just its ordained members.

Lumen Gentium argued that the laity shared in the priesthood of Christ, so that they were all called to offer God a spiritual sacrifice, to bear witness to Christ in the sight of the world, and to build up the church, each according to his own vocation. The mission of the church extends to all people in all times. To fulfill this mandate, God has established one priesthood – Christ's priesthood – in which all the members of the people of God share, although in different ways. God has willed that there also be a ministerial priesthood which is at the service of the entire body of the faithful. Its primary purpose is to activate and empower the priesthood of all the baptized. While affirming the distinct nature and theological legitimacy of this ordained priesthood, the Second Vatican Council stressed that it was there to serve the people of God as a whole.

In certain respects, the Second Vatican Council can be seen to echo themes associated with the Reformation. The laity, it affirmed, by virtue of their baptism, shared in their own distinct way in Christ's threefold office as priest, prophet, and king. As a result they shared in the mission of the church, especially in a way that was specific to their secular calling and their capacity to engage in temporal affairs. "They are called in a special way to make the Church present and operative where only through them can she become the salt of the earth."

This new approach has led to the revisiting of the history of the priesthood. For the Belgian Catholic writer Edward Schillebeeckx (1914–2009), the origins of Christian priesthood are to be found in the social dynamics of the earliest Christian communities. This ministry gradually developed a cultic dimension, which subsequently became its dominant characteristic. Yet this, according to Schillebeeckx, was a matter of historical contingency, and need not be seen as binding on the church. The sacramental needs of the community could, in certain situations, make it appropriate for a designated, non-ordained member of the church to celebrate the eucharist. Schillebeeckx's approach has caused controversy within Catholicism, not least because it leads to the loss of any clear sense of priestly identity. Some have argued that the recent difficulties in recruiting to the Catholic priesthood in the western world are at least partly due to the priesthood not clearly involving or demanding functions distinct from those which can be performed by the laity.

This debate will continue, as will others concerning the role of ministers within the church. Debates over the ordination of women to the priesthood or consecration to the episcopacy raise similar or related questions. In the end, many of these debates reduce to a single, yet far from simple, theological question: in what sense is a priest different from an ordinary Christian? The answer given to that question determines the answer given to many of the questions raised in this tantalizingly brief section.

Engaging with a text

One way of understanding the church is to see it as the sphere of God's transforming love for humanity. Some theologians argued that

the church could be seen as a walled garden – rather like the original garden of Eden – in which believers could grow in grace and holiness, protected from the world around them. This approach to the Christian church develops the notion of a closed and protected community, within which faith, hope, and love may blossom, and individuals may live in tranquility with each other and with God. The church is called and fashioned out of the world in much the same way as a garden is an enclosed portion of wilderness, which can be watered, cultivated, and tended. The church is thus an Edenic community, seeking to recover the values of paradise within its own bounds. This idea is found in the writings of Ephrem the Syrian (died 373), who regularly asserted that the church was not merely the gateway to paradise; in some way, a paradisiacal realm was established within its walls.

This idea is also found in a hymn by the great English writer Isaac Watts (1674–1748). Although Watts is probably best known for "When I survey the wondrous cross," he also penned a hymn which deals with the nature of the church:

> We are a garden walled around,
> Chosen and made peculiar ground;
> A little spot enclosed by grace
> Out of the world's wide wilderness.
>
> Like trees of myrrh and spice we stand,
> Planted by God the Father's hand;
> And all his springs in Zion flow,
> To make the young plantation grow.
>
> Awake, O, heavenly wind! and come,
> Blow on this garden of perfume;
> Spirit divine! descend and breathe
> A gracious gale on plants beneath.

The imagery derives from Augustine of Hippo, who pointed out that in the Old Testament book of the Song of Songs, the church is described as "an enclosed garden, my sister and bride, a sealed fountain, a well of living water, an orchard of choice fruit" (Song of Songs 4:12–13). Watts develops this imagery.

You may find the following questions helpful in interacting with Watts's text.

1. In the first verse, Watts uses the phrase "peculiar ground." What do you think he means by this? At this time, the English word "peculiar" bore the meaning of "special." In what way does Watts's text help identify what is distinctive about the church?

2. Note the use of wilderness imagery in this verse. This was popular at the time: John Bunyan's famous work *Pilgrim's Progress* refers to a journey through the "wilderness of the world." What do you think Watts hopes to demonstrate by contrasting the garden of the church with the wilderness of the world? How does this imagery help us understand his views on the nature and ministry of the church?

3. How do you think that the image of a garden helps Watts unfold the idea that the church is a place of spiritual growth and development? Does he see this process as something that we achieve, or something that is enabled and guided by God? What is the significance of his reference to the "heavenly wind" in the final verse?

Having reflected on the nature of the church, we now turn to consider what Christians understand by the sacraments.

CHAPTER 9

Sacraments

The term "sacrament" is widely used within Christianity to refer to certain rites or church ceremonies which are understood to possess a special spiritual significance. At its heart, a sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches recognize seven sacraments: baptism, the eucharist, confirmation (or chrismation), confession, anointing of the sick, marriage, and ordination. Protestants recognize only baptism and the eucharist as having been instituted by Christ.

There is no agreement within Christianity over how best to refer to the sacrament which focuses on bread and wine, following Christ's command to do so at the Last Supper. The following ways of referring to it are widely encountered in theological works:

- *The eucharist*. This term was widely used in Greek-speaking Christianity, and has also found wide acceptance in the west. The basic meaning of the Greek word *eucharistia* is "giving thanks" or "thanksgiving."
- *The Mass*. This term arose in the Latin-speaking western church during the third century. Its original meaning was "dismissal," referring to the sending out of the congregation into the world after the service was completed. Gradually, the name for this specific component of the service came to be applied to the service as a whole.
- *Holy Communion*. This name for the sacrament reflects the basic Christian conviction that it enables or encourages a deeper fellowship or "communion" between the believer and Christ.

- *Lord's Supper.* This term is particularly associated with Protestantism, and reflects the belief that one fundamental purpose of the sacrament is to recall this pivotal moment in Christ's life, immediately preceding his betrayal, arrest, trial, and crucifixion.

A number of theological debates have centered on the sacraments, and will be considered in this chapter:

1. What is a sacrament?
2. What is the function of the sacrament?
3. What factors affect the effectiveness of sacraments?
4. Is infant baptism justified?
5. In what way, if any, is Christ present at the eucharist?

What is a sacrament?

The New Testament does not make use of the specific term *sacrament*. Instead, we find the Greek word *mysterion* (which is naturally translated as "mystery"), used to refer to the saving work of God in general. This Greek word is never used to refer to what would now be regarded as a sacrament (for example, baptism). However, it is clear from what we know of the history of the early church that a connection was made at an early stage between the "mystery" of God's saving work in Christ and the "sacraments" of baptism and the eucharist.

The Latin term *sacramentum* came to be widely used in the western church during the third and fourth centuries. The third-century Roman theologian Tertullian played an important role in developing the theology and terminology of sacraments in three ways.

1. In using the Latin term *sacramentum* (now familiar to us in its English form "sacrament") to translate the Greek word *mysterion*.

2. In using the word "sacrament" *in the plural*. The New Testament spoke of "a mystery" in the singular. As we have just noted, Tertullian translated this as "sacrament," referring to this mystery – but he also used the term in the plural to refer to the individual sacraments that were linked with this mystery. Tertullian thus uses the Latin word

sacramentum in two different, though clearly related, senses: first to refer to the mystery of God's salvation; and, second, to refer to the symbols or rites that were associated with the recollection and appropriation of this salvation in the life of the church.

3. The exploitation of the theological significance of the parallel between sacraments and military oaths. Tertullian pointed out that, in normal Latin use, the word *sacramentum* meant "a sacred oath," referring to the oath of allegiance and loyalty to the state that was required of Roman soldiers. Tertullian used this parallel as a means of bringing out the importance of sacraments in relation to Christian commitment and loyalty within the church – an issue of especial significance when the church was under persecution and loyalty within the church was of paramount importance.

So how are sacraments to be defined? Augustine of Hippo argued that the defining characteristic of a sacrament was that it was a sign of sacred realities. "Signs, when applied to divine things, are called sacraments." Yet these signs are not arbitrary: there is some connection between the sign itself and what is being represented. "If sacraments did not bear some resemblance to the things of which they are the sacraments, they would not be sacraments at all." For example, baptism involves water, which is a sign of cleansing or purification – thus pointing to the cleansing and purification of the human soul through the grace of Christ.

The medieval period saw Augustine's ideas being developed and consolidated. Hugh of St. Victor offered the following definition in the twelfth century: "a sacrament is a physical or material element set before the external senses, representing by likeness, signifying by its institution, and containing by sanctification, some invisible and spiritual grace." It was an important development of Augustine's thinking, which had been a little vague on precisely which "signs" counted as sacraments. There are four aspects of Hugh's definition:

1. A "physical or material" element – such as the water of baptism, the bread and wine of the eucharist, or the oil of extreme unction.
2. A "likeness" to the thing which is signified, so that it can represent the thing signified. Thus the water of baptism can be argued to have a "likeness" to the cleansing power of the grace of Christ, allowing it to represent that grace in this context.

3. There must be a good reason for believing that the sign in question is *authorized* to represent the spiritual reality to which it points.
4. The sacrament is somehow capable of conferring the benefits which it signifies to those who partake in it.

But there was a problem. Hugh's definition excluded penance as a sacrament, as it contained no material element. By this stage, penance was firmly established as an integral element of the sacramental system of the church. Theory and practice were thus seriously out of line. A resolution of this difficulty became a matter of urgency.

The problem was solved by Peter Lombard (ca. 1100–60), who – by omitting one vital aspect of Hugh's definition – was able to bring theory into line with practice. Peter's achievement was to omit reference to any "physical or material element" in his definition of a sacrament as "a sign of the grace of God and a form of invisible grace, so that it bears its image and exists as its cause." This definition was included in Peter Lombard's highly influential and authoritative theological textbook *The Four Books of the Sentences*, and so passed into general use in later medieval theology, remaining virtually unchallenged until the time of the Reformation.

In the sixteenth century, Protestantism challenged this definition on a number of grounds, offering a narrower definition of the essential feature of a sacrament. Martin Luther, writing in 1520, declared that the essential feature of a sacrament was that it was a physical sign of a promise of God, the use of which was sanctioned by Christ himself.

> It has seemed right to restrict the name of sacrament to those promises of God which have signs attached to them. The remainder, not being connected to signs, are merely promises. Hence, strictly speaking, there are only two sacraments in the church of God – baptism and the bread. For only in these two do we find the divinely instituted sign and the promise of the forgiveness of sins.

Luther thus restricted the number of sacraments to two – baptism and eucharist. This fundamental distinction between Protestantism and Catholicism remains in place to this day.

What is the function of the sacrament?

From what has already been said, sacraments have universally been understood as *signs* within Christian theology. So what do sacraments do? *They signify divine grace.* But this is only a partial answer. Do sacraments do *more* than simply signify the grace of God? Are the sacraments merely signs, or are they a special kind of sign − such as an effective sign, which causes what is being signified?

Traces of this view may be found in the second century. Ignatius of Antioch declared that the eucharist was "the medicine of immortality and the antidote that we should not die, but live for ever in Jesus Christ." Ignatius clearly believed that the eucharist does not merely *signify* eternal life, but is somehow instrumental in *effecting* it. The idea is developed subsequently by many writers, especially Ambrose of Milan (ca. 340–97). Writing in the fourth century, Ambrose argued that in baptism, the Holy Spirit "coming upon the font or upon those who are to be baptized, effects the reality of regeneration."

In medieval theology, a careful distinction was drawn between the "sacraments of the Old Covenant" (such as circumcision) and the "sacraments of the New Covenant." The essential distinction which early medieval theologians identified as lying between them is that the sacraments of the Old Covenant merely *signified* spiritual realities, whereas the sacraments of the New Covenant *actualized* what they signified. The thirteenth-century Franciscan writer Bonaventure (1221–74) made this point as follows, using a medical analogy:

> In the Old Law, there were ointments of a kind, but they were figurative and did not heal. The disease was lethal, but the anointings were superficial … Genuinely healing ointments must bring both spiritual anointing and a life-giving power; it was only Christ our Lord who did this, since through his death, the sacraments have the power to bring to life.

These views remain characteristic of modern Catholicism. Sacraments convey the grace that they represent. However, many theologians add a qualifier here, noting that it is possible for an individual to resist this grace, by placing an obstacle in its path. Thus the Council of

Trent's Decree on the Sacraments condemns the teaching "that sacraments of the new law do not contain the grace which they signify, or that they do not confer this grace to those who present no obstacle." The second phrase is important, as it reflects an awareness that obstacles can be placed in the way of the effectiveness of the sacraments by individual believers.

The Second Vatican Council, while continuing to emphasize the effective causality of sacraments, noted the importance of believers responding appropriately to them:

> The purpose of the sacraments is to sanctify men, to build up the body of Christ, and, finally, to give worship to God; because they are signs they also instruct. They not only presuppose faith, but by words and objects they also nourish, strengthen, and express it; that is why they are called "sacraments of faith." They do indeed impart grace, but, in addition, the very act of celebrating them most effectively disposes the faithful to receive this grace in a fruitful manner, to worship God duly, and to practice charity.

Protestantism found itself divided over the question of what the sacraments achieved. Luther was prepared to allow that sacraments caused what they signified. In his *Small Catechism* (1529), he made it clear that baptism brought about both the signification and causation of divine forgiveness:

> Q. What gifts or benefits does Baptism bring?
> A. It brings about the forgiveness of sins, saves us from death and the devil, and grants eternal blessedness to all who believe, as the Word and promise of God declare.
> Q. How can water bring about such a great thing?
> A. Water does not; but it is the Word of God with and through the water, and our faith which trusts in the Word of God in the water. For without the Word of God, that water is nothing but water, and there is no Baptism. But when it is linked with the Word of God, it is a Baptism, that is, a gracious water of life, and a bath of new birth in the Holy Spirit.

These views remain generally characteristic of Lutheranism to this day. Other Protestant writers, however, were suspicious of such an

approach, which they regarded as approaching a magical view of sacraments. The Swiss reformer Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531) insisted that sacraments were signs, and nothing more:

> Sacraments are simply the signs of holy things. Baptism is a sign which pledges us to the Lord Jesus Christ. The Remembrance shows us that Christ suffered death for our sake. They are the signs and pledges of these holy things.

Zwingli therefore argues that both baptism and the eucharist (which he refers to as "the Remembrance") are external signs of spiritual realities, which have no power in themselves to bring about what they signify. Baptism is thus a sign, but not a cause, of God's forgiveness of sins. This viewpoint remains influential within Protestantism, and is especially found within modern evangelicalism.

Yet a third Protestant approach was set out by John Calvin and his successors within the Reformed tradition. Calvin's approach can be seen as a mediating approach, roughly halfway between Luther's causative view and Zwingli's representationalist view of the sacraments. Calvin defines a sacrament as "an external symbol by which the Lord seals on our consciences his promises of good will towards us, in order to sustain the weakness of our faith." Yet although the sacraments are external signs, he argues that there is such a close connection between the symbol and the gift which it symbolizes that we can "easily pass from one to the other." The sign is visible and physical, whereas the thing signified is invisible and spiritual – yet the connection between the sign and the thing signified is so intimate that it is permissible to apply the one to the other.

> Why should the Lord put in your hand the symbol of his body, unless it was to assure you that you really participate in it? And if it is true that a visible sign is given to us to seal the gift of an invisible thing, when we have received the symbol of the body, let us rest assured that the body itself is also given to us.

Calvin can thus maintain the difference between sign and thing signified, while insisting that the sign really points to the gift it signifies.

One of the most characteristic features of Protestantism was its insistence upon the laity being allowed to receive communion "in both kinds" – in other words, receiving both the bread and the wine. There

had been a longstanding tradition within the western church, whose origins are somewhat obscure, which held that only priests should be allowed to receive both elements; the laity were only allowed bread. (Some historians speculate that early medieval problems with an enthusiastic but intoxicated laity may lie behind the practice.)

Luther was adamant that the laity should be allowed to receive both the bread and the wine. The bread and wine were both signs of God's grace and love. To deny the laity access to both sacramental signs was to imply that they were also denied access to the divine realities they signified. The practice of "communion in both kinds" would henceforth be characteristic of the Reformation. It is important to appreciate the theological defense of this practice – namely, that to exclude people from sharing in the sign of a divine reality is tantamount to declaring that they are also excluded from that reality itself.

A related theological debate is also of importance here – the question of the worthiness of the person who presides over the sacraments.

What factors affect the effectiveness of sacraments?

In chapter 8, we noted some of the issues which lay behind the Donatist controversy. One of these concerns the personal worthiness or holiness of the minister who administers the sacraments. The Donatists refused to recognize that a *traditor* – that is to say, a Christian minister whose personal credentials had been compromised or tainted through collaboration with the Roman authorities during the Diocletian persecution – could administer the sacraments. Subjective imperfections on the part of the person administering the sacraments rendered them invalid. Accordingly, they argued that baptisms, ordinations, and eucharists administered by such ministers were of no spiritual value.

Responding to this approach, Augustine argued that Donatism laid excessive emphasis upon the qualities of the human agent, and gave insufficient weight to the grace of Jesus Christ. It is, he argued, impossible for fallen human beings to make distinctions concerning who is pure and impure, worthy or unworthy. This view, which is totally consistent with his understanding of the church as a "mixed body" of saints and sinners, holds that the efficacy of a sacrament rests, not upon

the merits of the individual administering it, but upon the merits of
the one who instituted it in the first place – Jesus Christ. The validity
of sacraments is independent of the merits of those who administer
them.

The theological issue at stake has come to be represented by two
Latin slogans, each reflecting a different understanding of the grounds
of the efficacy of the sacraments.

1. Sacraments are efficacious *ex opere operantis* – literally, "on account
of the work of the one who works." Here, the efficacy of the sacra-
ment is understood to be dependent upon the personal qualities of the
minister.

2. Sacraments are efficacious *ex opere operato* – literally, "on account
of the work which is done." Here, the efficacy of the sacrament is
understood to be dependent upon the grace of Christ, which the sacra-
ments represent and convey.

The Donatist position is best described as reflecting an *ex opere oper-
antis*, and Augustine's as reflecting an *ex opere operato* understanding
of sacramental causality. The latter view became normative within the
western church, and was maintained by the mainstream reformers dur-
ing the sixteenth century.

The *ex opere operato* approach to the efficacy of the sacraments was
vigorously defended by Pope Innocent III (1160–1216) in the late
twelfth century. For Innocent, the merits or demerits of the priest are
of no consequence in relation to the efficacy of the eucharist. In the
end, the sacraments are grounded in the Word of God, which is not
restricted by human weakness or failing:

> Nothing more is accomplished by a good priest and nothing less by
> a wicked priest, because it is accomplished by the word of the creator
> and not the merit of the priest. Thus the wickedness of the priest does
> not nullify the effect of the sacrament, just as the sickness of a doctor
> does not destroy the power of his medicine. Although the "doing of the
> thing [*opus operans*]" may be unclean, nevertheless the "thing which is
> done [*opus operatum*]" is always clean.

A similar approach was adopted by mainline Protestant writers dur-
ing the sixteenth century. The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of
England (1563) state this point clearly:

For those who receive the sacraments which are administered to them by faith and in proper fashion, the effect of Christ's ordinances is not taken away by the wickedness of the minister, nor is the grace of God's gifts diminished. These are effective on account of the institution and promise of Christ, even if they are administered by wicked people.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* offers a definitive statement of what is to be understood by an *ex opera operato* understanding of how the sacraments function:

Celebrated worthily in faith, the sacraments confer the grace that they signify. They are *efficacious* because in them Christ himself is at work: it is he who baptizes, he who acts in his sacraments in order to communicate the grace that each sacrament signifies … This is the meaning of the Church's affirmation that the sacraments act *ex opere operato* (literally: "by the very fact of the action's being performed"), i.e., by virtue of the saving work of Christ, accomplished once for all. It follows that "the sacrament is not wrought by the righteousness of either the celebrant or the recipient, but by the power of God." From the moment that a sacrament is celebrated in accordance with the intention of the Church, the power of Christ and his Spirit acts in and through it, independently of the personal holiness of the minister. Nevertheless, the fruits of the sacraments also depend on the disposition of the one who receives them.

We now turn to consider two theological questions that have caused considerable debate within Christianity. One relates to baptism; the other to the eucharist. We begin by considering what theological defense can be given of the church's longstanding practice of baptizing infants.

Is infant baptism justified?

The New Testament includes no explicit references to the baptism of infants. However, it does not explicitly forbid it, and there are also a number of passages which could be interpreted as implying its practice – for example, references to the baptizing of entire households (which would probably have included infants) – at several points

(Acts 16:15, 33; 1 Corinthians 1:16). Paul treats baptism as a spiritual counterpart to circumcision (Colossians 2:11–12), suggesting that the parallel may extend to its application to infants.

The practice of baptizing infants born to Christian parents – often referred to as *paedobaptism* – appears to have been a response to a number of pressures. It is possible that the parallel with the Jewish rite of circumcision led Christians to devise an equivalent rite of passage for Christian infants. More generally, there seems to have been a pastoral need for Christian parents to celebrate the birth of a child within a believing household. Infant baptism may well have had its origins partly in response to this concern. However, it must be stressed that there is

Figure 19   Perugino, *The Baptism of Christ*, ca. 1498–1500, oil on olivewood, 30 × 23.3 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. The Baptism of Christ is seen by many theologians as a mandate for the baptism of Christians. AKG Images/Erich Lessing.

genuine uncertainty concerning both the historical origins and the social or theological causes of the practice. What can be said is that the practice had become normal, if not universal, by the second or third century.

So what theological defense can be offered for this? In what follows, we shall explore a number of theological rationalizations of the practice of infant baptism, along with some criticisms of the practice.

1. Infant baptism is grounded in the efficacy of the sacrament
One obvious question associated with infant baptism is this: as the infant has no conscious faith of its own, how can it be considered to make an informed response to the Christian gospel? As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* points out, "Always, Baptism is seen as connected with faith: 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household,' St. Paul declared to his jailer in Philippi. And the narrative continues, the jailer 'was baptized at once, with all his family.'" Is not the baptism of infants based on a mechanical or "magical" view of the sacraments?

Catholicism has always taken the view that an *ex opera operato* view of baptism avoids this difficulty. The effectiveness of baptism is not dependent upon human comprehension of the mode of its operation. As the *Catechism* puts it: "The sheer gratuitousness of the grace of salvation is particularly manifest in infant Baptism." Additionally, the weakness of individual faith is supplemented by the corporate faith of the church. "It is only within the faith of the Church that each of the faithful can believe." Baptism thus initiates a process of development in faith.

As we shall see, some Protestants reject infant baptism. In particular, many evangelicals hold that baptism is not a sacrament (in the strict sense of the word), but is rather to be seen as an "ordinance." On this view, baptism does not in any way convey the grace it symbolizes; rather, it is simply a public manifestation of the person's conversion. Since only adults can be converted, baptism is inappropriate for infants or for children who have not yet reached maturity.

Yet this viewpoint is not universal within Protestantism. Lutherans, following Luther himself, insist that the efficacy of baptism as a sacrament means that it has an effect on infants, even if this cannot be discerned. A statement issued recently by the Missouri Lutheran

Synod (an American Lutheran denomination) makes this point clearly:

> Lutherans believe that the Bible teaches that a person is saved by God's grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ. Baptism, we believe, is one of the miraculous means of grace (together with God's written and spoken Word) through which God creates the gift of faith in a person's heart. Although we do not claim to understand how this happens or how it is possible, we believe (because of what the Bible says about baptism) that when an infant is baptized God creates faith in the heart of that infant. This faith cannot yet, of course, be expressed or articulated, yet it is real and present all the same.

2. Infant baptism remits the guilt of original sin

One of Augustine of Hippo's most significant contributions to the theology of baptism was his argument that humans are born into the world already contaminated by original sin. By "original sin," Augustine meant a flaw, defect, or infection from the moment of birth, rather than something that was acquired later in life through a sinful action. For Augustine, sinful human nature gives rise to individual sinful actions. Sin causes sins. Or, to use a medical analogy, sin is an illness, while individual sins are its symptoms. For Augustine, baptism remits the guilt of original sin.

So what happens to those who die without having been baptized, whether in infancy or later in life? If baptism remits the guilt of original sin, people who die without being baptized remain guilty. So what happens to them? Augustine's position demands that such people cannot be saved. Augustine himself certainly held to this belief, and argued forcefully that unbaptized infants were condemned to eternal damnation.

Augustine's position was modified in the light of popular pressure, apparently based upon a belief that his doctrine was unjust. Peter Lombard argued that unbaptized infants receive only "the penalty of being condemned" and do not receive the more painful "penalty of the senses." Although they are condemned, that condemnation does not include the experience of the physical pain of hell. This idea is sometimes referred to as "limbo," although this has never become part of the official teaching of any Christian body, including Roman Catholicism.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* can be seen as retaining this Augustinian emphasis upon the necessity of baptism for salvation, while at the same time not wishing to exclude God's special graciousness towards those infants who have died outside baptism.

> As regards children who have died without Baptism, the Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God, as she does in her funeral rites for them. Indeed, the great mercy of God who desires that all men should be saved, and Jesus' tenderness toward children which caused him to say: "Let the children come to me, do not hinder them," allow us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without Baptism.

3. Infant baptism is a sign of the covenant between God and the church

Christian theology has always seen baptism as the Christian equivalent of circumcision. In the New Testament, Paul notes that baptism has replaced circumcision (Colossians 2:11–12). In this passage, Paul refers to baptism as "the circumcision of Christ." Since only infants were normally circumcised under the Old Law, a parallel seemed to exist between the circumcision of male infants in Judaism, and the baptism of infants in the church.

Developing this idea, Zwingli argued that baptism is to be seen as the New Testament equivalent of the Old Testament rite of circumcision. It is gentler than circumcision, in that it involves no pain or shedding of blood, and more inclusive, in that it embraces both male and female infants. The more *gentle* character of the gospel was publicly demonstrated by the absence of pain or the shedding of blood in the sacrament. Christ suffered – in being circumcised himself in addition to his death on the cross – in order that his people need not suffer in this manner. Further, Zwingli stressed that baptism was the sign of belonging to a community – the church. The fact that the child was not conscious of this belonging was irrelevant: whether the child knew it or not, it *was* a member of the Christian community, and baptism was the public demonstration of this membership.

Yet not all Christians are persuaded of the merits of infant baptism. In the early church, Tertullian argued that the baptism of children should be deferred until such time as they "know Christ."

Anabaptism – a movement within the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century – insisted that baptism was to be reserved for those who understood what it meant, and had consented to be baptized.

Perhaps the most significant theological critique of infant baptism is due to the great twentieth-century Protestant theologian Karl Barth, who registered three fundamental areas of concern and criticism:

1. Infant baptism is without biblical foundation. All the evidence points to infant baptism having become the norm in the post-apostolic period, not the period of the New Testament itself.
2. The practice of infant baptism has led to the disastrous assumption that individuals are Christians as a result of their birth. Barth argues, in terms which remind many of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's idea of "cheap grace," that infant baptism devalues the grace of God, and reduces Christianity to a purely social phenomenon.
3. The practice of infant baptism weakens the central link between baptism and Christian discipleship. Baptism is a witness to the grace of God, and marks the beginning of the human response to this grace. In that infants cannot meaningfully make this response, the theological meaning of baptism is obscured.

In what way, if any, is Christ present at the eucharist?

The phrase "the real presence" has come to denote the idea that Christ is present, in some way and to some extent, at the eucharist. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* sets out this basic belief with clarity and precision:

> The mode of Christ's presence under the Eucharistic species is unique … In the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist "the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, *the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained.*" This presence is called "real" – by which is not intended to exclude the other types of presence as if they could not be "real" too, but because it is presence in the fullest sense: that is to say, it is a *substantial* presence by which Christ, God and man, makes himself wholly and entirely present.

Figure 20   Juan de Juanes, *The Last Supper*, ca. 1562, oil on panel, 116 × 191 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid. AKG Images/Erich Lessing.

At the Last Supper, Jesus Christ used these words as he broke the bread in the presence of his disciples: "this is my body" (Matthew 26:26). The doctrine of the "real presence" is grounded in the basic idea that the eucharistic bread and the wine either are transformed into the body and blood of Christ, or that they represent him in such an efficacious manner that he may be regarded as present. The words spoken by Jesus Christ over the bread at the Last Supper, and repeated in the liturgy of the church, were clearly of foundational importance in relation to the emergence of this idea. It was therefore inevitable and entirely proper that considerable theological attention should be given to the explanation of the meaning of this practice. What did it achieve? And in what way did the eucharistic bread and wine differ from ordinary bread and wine?

In what follows, we shall consider four main approaches to such questions that have been significant in theological debates.

1. Transubstantiation

This approach, endorsed by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), rests on Aristotle's distinction between "substance" and "accident." The *substance* of something is its essential nature, whereas its *accidents* are its

outward appearances (for example, its color, shape, smell, and so forth). The doctrine of transubstantiation affirms that the accidents of the bread and wine (their outward appearance, taste, smell, and so forth) remain unchanged at the moment of consecration, while their substance changes from that of bread and wine to that of the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

This doctrine underlies one of the Catholic church's best-known eucharistic hymns – Thomas Aquinas's *Pange lingua* ("Sing, my tongue"), dating from the middle of the thirteenth century. The hymn sets out a theology of the real presence, which identifies both its historical and theological significance. The fourth of its six verses sets out the idea of transubstantiation. As the Latin text is difficult to translate without losing its rhyming scheme, I have reproduced the original Latin text below, followed by my very literal English translation:

> Verbum caro, panem verum
> Verbo carnem efficit:
> Fitque sanguis Christi merum,
> Et si sensus deficit,
> Ad firmandum cor sincerum
> Sola fides sufficit.

The Word in flesh makes real bread into his flesh with a word; and also wine into the blood of Christ; And if the senses are inadequate to reassure the sincere heart, faith alone is sufficient.

This approach, often criticized by Protestant theologians, was reaffirmed by the Council of Trent: "After the consecration of the bread and wine, our Lord Jesus Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained in the venerable sacrament of the holy eucharist under the appearance of those physical things." The Council vigorously defended both the doctrine and the terminology of transubstantiation. "By the consecration of the bread and wine a change is brought about of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ and of the whole substance of the wine into the blood of Christ. This change the holy catholic church properly and appropriately calls transubstantiation."

2. Transsignification and transfinalization

In more recent times, the idea of transubstantiation has been reworked by Roman Catholic theologians, such as the Belgian writer Edward Schillebeeckx (1914–2009). In his important study *The Eucharist* (1968), Schillebeeckx argued that the Aristotelian philosophical framework underlying the notion of transubstantiation caused difficulties for many modern people. A new approach was needed, he argued, which would retain the essential theological insights of the Council of Trent, without embodying these in an outdated and vulnerable philosophical framework.

Schillebeeckx noted that a growing hostility towards ontological or "physical" interpretations of the eucharist within Catholic circles after the Second World War was matched by a "rediscovery of the sacramental symbolic activity" – that is, a realization that "the sacraments are first and foremost symbolic acts or activity as signs." Schillebeeckx thus introduced the terms "transfunctionalism," "transfinalization," and "transsignification" to express the idea that the "bread and wine become the subject of a new *establishment of meaning*, not by men, but by the living Lord *in* the Church, through which they become the *sign* of the real presence of Christ giving himself to us."

Schillebeeckx's point is that the Catholic interpretation of the signification of the eucharistic bread and wine is not arbitrary, nor is it a human imposition upon them; it is rather an act of discernment by the church, which it has been *authorized* to undertake by Christ. There is, for Schillebeeckx, no need to invoke the notion of a physical change of substance of the bread and wine. Christ's intention was not to alter the metaphysics of the eucharistic elements, but to ensure that these pointed to his continuing presence within the church, as the community of the faithful.

The official response of the Catholic Church to these developments was to affirm that they were acceptable, provided that they were upheld within the context of the traditional understanding of transubstantiation. If the bread and the wine were indeed changed in the manner that this traditional teaching affirmed, it followed that both the goal and the signification of the bread and wine were changed as well.

3. Sacramental union, or consubstantiation

A third view is especially associated with Martin Luther, and is characteristic of much contemporary Lutheran theology. This approach – sometimes referred to as "consubstantiation," but more accurately known as "the sacramental union" – insists upon the simultaneous presence of both bread and the body of Christ at one and the same time. There is no change in substance; the substance of both bread and the body of Christ are present together. The doctrine of transubstantiation seemed to Luther to be an absurdity, an attempt to rationalize a mystery.

For Luther, the crucial point was that Christ was really present at the eucharist – not some particular theory as to how he was present. Luther borrowed an image from the patristic writer Origen to make his point: if iron is placed in a fire and heated, it glows – and in that glowing iron, both the iron and heat are present. Why not use some simple everyday analogy such as this to illustrate the mystery of the presence of Christ at the eucharist, instead of rationalizing it using some scholastic subtlety? It is not the doctrine of transubstantiation which is to be believed, but simply that Christ really is present at the eucharist. It is more important to affirm this fact than to offer any theory or explanation of it. This is reflected in the contemporary Lutheran belief that Christ's true body and blood are present in, with, and under the external elements of bread and wine – even though this must be recognized as a divine mystery beyond human comprehension or explanation.

4. Memorialism

For some Protestant writers, particularly within evangelical traditions, Christ is remembered in his absence at the Lord's Supper. The intellectual roots of this approach are often identified as lying in the writings of Huldrych Zwingli. Zwingli's approach involved challenging the traditional interpretation of the words "this is my body." Up to this point, most Christians had seen these as a direct affirmation of the identity of the eucharistic bread with the body of Christ. Zwingli believed otherwise. He argued that scripture employed many figures of speech. Thus the word "is" might in one context mean "is absolutely identical with," and in another it might mean "represents" or "signifies."

Zwingli concludes that "there are innumerable passages in Scripture where the word 'is' means 'signifies.'" The question that must therefore

be addressed, he declares, is whether Christ's words "this is my body" are to be taken literally or metaphorically. He has little doubt of the answer.

> In the words "This is my body," the word "this" means the bread, and the word "body" means the body which was put to death for us. Therefore the word "is" cannot be taken literally, for the bread is not the body.

Zwingli also pointed out that both scripture and the creeds affirm that Christ is now "seated at the right hand of God." Now Zwingli has not the slightest idea where this might be, and wastes no time speculating on its location – but, he argues, it does mean that wherever Christ is now, he cannot be present in the eucharist. How could he be in two places at once? For this reason, Zwingli proposes a doctrine of the "real absence" of Christ at the eucharist. Christ, who is somewhere else, is remembered in his absence, and the hope of his future return is reaffirmed. For Zwingli, the eucharist was about "proclaiming the Lord's death until he comes again" (1 Corinthians 11:26).

Engaging with a text

In 1982 the Faith and Order Commission of the Protestant World Council of Churches published a highly influential theological state-ment entitled "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry." This World Coun-cil of Churches paper (sometimes known as the "Lima Text," after the Peruvian city which hosted this meeting) is widely regarded as a landmark in ecumenical discussions of its themes. The statement was the outcome of several years of ecumenical study and dialogue, mainly between Protestant denominations, to identify what basic principles could be affirmed together by the churches of the Reformed, Lutheran, Methodist, Anglican, and Orthodox traditions. The document proved highly influential in catalyzing ecumenical discussions on issues relating to the sacraments and Christian ministry.

The document sets out a justification for baptism, and sketches an understanding of the differences that it makes. What follows is a state-ment concerning the identity of baptism. Read it through, and take

time to follow through the biblical references embedded within the text.

> Baptism is the sign of new life through Jesus Christ. It unites the one baptized with Christ and with his people. The New Testament scriptures and the liturgy of the Church unfold the meaning of baptism in various images which express the riches of Christ and the gifts of his salvation. These images are sometimes linked with the symbolic uses of water in the Old Testament. Baptism is participation in Christ's death and resurrection (Romans 6:3–5; Colossians 2:12); a washing away of sin (1 Corinthians 6:11); a new birth (John 3:5); an enlightenment by Christ (Ephesians 5:14); a reclothing in Christ (Galatians 3:27); a renewal by the Spirit (Titus 3:5); the experience of salvation from the flood (1 Peter 3:20–21); an exodus from bondage (1 Corinthians 10:1–2) and a liberation into a new humanity in which barriers of division, whether of sex or race or social status, are transcended (Galatians 3:27–28; 1 Corinthians 12:13). The images are many but the reality is one.

1. Work through the biblical passages incorporated within this statement. The basic point being made in the document is that baptism weaves together some of the major themes and emphases of the Christian faith. Baptism is a multifaceted entity, with many different dimensions and levels of meaning. This is what the document means when it affirms that "the images are many but the reality is one."
2. Note how baptism is referred to as a "sign." Look again at the list of meanings of baptism that you noted in response to the previous question. Which of these seem to have an obvious link with the symbolism of water?
3. Remember that this document was intended to be ecumenical, aiming to help Protestant churches draw closer to each other – or at least understand each other better. Read the text again, and reflect on whether any particular Christian denominations or groups might find it difficult or controversial at any point.

We now turn to consider the area of theology often known as "eschatology" – the doctrine of the last things. In the final chapter of this short work, we shall look at the Christian hope, and the theological questions that arise from this important aspect of the Christian faith.

CHAPTER 10

Heaven

Most works of Christian theology follow the pattern of the creeds, and end with a discussion of eternal life. This basic introduction to the themes of Christian theology follows this convention. The term "eschatology" (from the Greek words *ta eschata*, meaning "the last things") is widely used in Christian theology to refer to the Christian expectations of resurrection and judgment. In this final chapter, we shall consider some core aspects of Christian thinking about eschatology, focusing especially on the idea of heaven.

In the broadest sense of the term, "eschatology" is "discourse about the end." The "end" in question may refer to an individual's existence, or to the closing of the present age. History had a beginning; it will one day come to an end. "Eschatology" deals with a network of beliefs relating to the end of life and history, whether of an individual or of the world in general. It has unquestionably stimulated and contributed extensively to some of the most creative and fantastic movements within Christianity.

The New Testament

The New Testament is saturated with the belief that something new has happened in the history of humanity, in and through the life and death of Jesus Christ, and above all through his resurrection from the dead. The theme of hope predominates, even in the face of death. In view of the importance of the New Testament material to the shaping

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of Christian thinking on eschatology, we shall consider some of its leading themes, as these are found in the preaching of Jesus Christ himself, and the writings of Paul.

The dominant theme in the preaching of Jesus Christ is the coming of the kingdom of God. This phrase is rare in contemporary Jewish writings, and is widely regarded as one of the most distinctive aspects of the preaching of Jesus. This term, or closely related ideas, occurs some 70 times in the synoptic gospels. The use of the word "kingdom" in this context is potentially misleading. Although this English word has been used regularly since the sixteenth century to translate the Greek term *basileia*, the term "kingship" is more appropriate. The term "kingdom" suggests a definite geographical region which is being ruled, whereas the Greek term refers primarily to the act of ruling itself. In New Testament scholarship, the term "the kingly rule of God" has often been used to make this point clear.

The term has strongly eschatological associations in the preaching of Jesus. Although many nineteenth-century liberal writers, such as Albrecht Benjamin Ritschl (1822–89), attempted to interpret it in terms of a present set of moral values, it is clear that the term has both present and future associations. The kingdom is something which is "drawing near" (Mark 1:15), yet which still belongs in its fullness to the future. The Lord's Prayer, which remains of central importance to individual and corporate Christian prayer and worship, includes reference to the future coming of the kingdom (Matthew 6:10).

At the Last Supper, Jesus spoke to his disciples of a future occasion when they would drink wine in the kingdom of God (Mark 14:25). The general consensus among New Testament scholars is that there is a tension between the "now" and the "not yet" in relation to the kingdom of God, similar to that envisaged by the parable of the growing mustard seed (Mark 4:30–2). The term "inaugurated eschatology" has become widely used to refer to the relation of the present inauguration and future fulfillment of the kingdom.

Paul's eschatology also shows a tension between the "now" and the "not yet." This can be seen from the key images that Paul uses to speak about the Christian hope, including the following.

1. The presence of a "new age." At several points, Paul emphasizes that the coming of Christ inaugurates a new era or "age" (Greek:

aionos). Although this new age – which Paul designates a "new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17) – has yet to be fulfilled, its presence can already be experienced. For this reason, Paul can refer to the "end of the ages" in Christ (1 Corinthians 10:11). The position which Paul opposes in the early chapters of 1 Corinthians clearly corresponds to a realized eschatology, in which each and every aspect of the age to come has been fulfilled in the present. It seems that Paul's opponents at Corinth were teaching that the final age was now present, and all the benefits of eternity were to be had in the here and now. For Paul, there is an element of postponement: the ultimate transformation of the world is yet to come, but may be confidently awaited.

2. The resurrection of Jesus is seen by Paul as an eschatological event, which affirms that the "new age" really has been inaugurated. Although this does not exhaust the meaning of Christ's resurrection (which has significant soteriological implications: see chapter 5), Paul clearly sees Christ's resurrection as an event which enables believers to live in the knowledge that death – a dominant feature of the "present age" – has been overcome.

3. Paul looks forward to the future coming of Jesus Christ in judgment at the end of time, confirming the new life of believers and their triumph over sin and death. A number of images are used to refer to this, including "the day of the Lord." At one point (1 Corinthians 16:22), Paul uses an Aramaic term, *maranatha* (literally, "Come, O Lord!") as an expression of the Christian hope. The Greek term *parousia* is often used to refer to the future coming of Christ (e.g., 1 Corinthians 15:23; 2 Thessalonians 2:1, 8–9). For Paul, there is an intimate connection between the final coming of Christ and the execution of final judgment.

4. A major theme of Paul's eschatology is the coming of the Holy Spirit. This theme, which builds on a longstanding aspect of Jewish expectations, sees the gift of the Spirit as a confirmation that the new age has dawned in Christ. One of the most significant aspects of Paul's thought at this point is his interpretation of the gift of the Spirit to believers as an *arrabon* (2 Corinthians 1:22, 5:5). This word, rarely used in the New Testament, has the basic sense of a "guarantee" or "pledge," affirming that the believer may rest assured of ultimate

salvation on account of the present possession of the Spirit. Although salvation remains something which will be consummated in the future, the believer may have present assurance of this future event through the indwelling of the Spirit.

It will therefore be clear that the eschatology of the New Testament is complex. However, a leading theme is that something which happened in the past has inaugurated something new, which will reach its final consummation in the future. The Christian believer is thus caught up in the tension between the "now" and the "not yet." How this tension is to be understood and articulated is a subject of considerable interest in its own right and will be considered at points in this present chapter. Our attention now turns to the development of eschatological themes in the later Christian tradition.

Augustine: the two cities

One of the most influential reworkings of the corporate aspects of the eschatological ideas of the New Testament is that of Augustine of Hippo, found in his *City of God*. This work was written in a context which could easily be described as "apocalyptic" – the destruction of the great city of Rome and the collapse of the Roman empire. A central theme of the work is the relation between two cities – the "city of God" and the "secular city" or "the city of the world." The complexities of the Christian life, especially its political aspects, are due to the dialectic between these two cities.

Believers live "in this intermediate period" separating the incarnation of Christ from his final return in glory. The church is to be seen as in exile in the "city of the world." It is in the world, yet not of the world. There is a strong eschatological tension between the present reality, in which the church is exiled in the world and somehow obliged to maintain its distinctive ethos while surrounded by disbelief, and the future hope, in which the church will be delivered from the world and finally allowed to share in the glory of God. Augustine does not agree with the Donatist idea of the church as a body of saints (see chapter 8). For Augustine, the church shares in the fallen character of the world and therefore includes the pure and the impure, saints and sinners. Only at the last day will this tension finally be resolved.

Yet alongside this corporate understanding of eschatology, Augustine shows an awareness of the individualist dimensions of the Christian hope. This is especially clear in his discussion of the tension between what human nature presently is and what it finally will be. Believers are saved, purified, and perfected – yet in hope (Latin: *in spe*) but not in reality (Latin: *in re*). Salvation is something that is inaugurated in the life of the believer, but which will only find its completion at the end of history.

Augustine is thus able to offer Christians hope, as they contemplate the sinful nature of their lives, and wonder how this is to be reconciled with the gospel imperatives to be holy, like God. For Augustine, believers are able to reach out in hope, beyond their present condition. This is not a spurious or invented hope, but a sure and certain hope which is grounded in the resurrection of Christ.

Augustine is aware of the fact that the word "end" has two meanings. The "end" can mean "either the ceasing to be of what was, or the perfecting of what was begun." Eternal life is to be seen as the state in which our love of God, begun in this life, is finally brought to its completion and consummation, through union with the object of that love. Eternal life is the "reward that makes perfect," to which the Christian has looked forward throughout the life of faith.

Medieval debates about the resurrection body

The concept of the resurrection of the body generated many fascinating debates, especially during the Middle Ages. One of the most intriguing questions to be discussed was this: what does the resurrection body look like? What will people look like in heaven? If someone dies at the age of sixty, will they appear in the streets of the New Jerusalem looking like a sixty-year-old? And if someone dies at the age of ten, will they appear as a child? This issue caused the spilling of much theological ink, especially during the Middle Ages.

A consensus seems to have emerged by the end of the thirteenth century. Since Jesus Christ was about thirty years old at the time of his death, this is to be regarded as a perfect age – and is hence the apparent age of those raised to glory in heaven. Believers will therefore be resurrected as they would have appeared at that time – even if they

never lived to reach that age. The New Jerusalem will thus be populated by men and women as they would appear at the age of thirty, but with every blemish removed. Peter Lombard (ca. 1100–60) discusses the matter in a manner typical of his time:

> A boy who dies immediately after being born will be resurrected in that form which he would have had if he had lived to the age of thirty years, hindered by no defect of his body. So it can be seen that this substance, which is so small in birth, becomes so great in the resurrection, on account of its being multiplied in itself and of itself. From this, it can be seen that, even if he had lived, the substance would not have come from another source, but would have increased by itself, just as Adam's rib, from which the woman was made, and as the loaves were multiplied in the Gospels.

Honorius of Autun (1080–1154) had made much the same point a century later: "All the dead – an infant of one year as much as a man of ninety – will rise with the same age and size as Christ when he rose, namely, thirty years old."

The great Franciscan theologian Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (ca. 1217–74) saw this idea as being implied by a passage in the New Testament, which spoke of believers finally attaining a "perfect humanity," in accordance with the "measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13). Bonaventure interpreted this passage as teaching that the physical status of Jesus of Nazareth at the time of his death was normative for the resurrection body.

Modernity: criticism and recovery of eschatology

The intensely rationalist atmosphere of the Enlightenment led to criticism of the Christian doctrine of the last things as ignorant superstition, devoid of any real basis in life. Particular criticism was directed against the idea of hell. The strongly utilitarian outlook of the later Enlightenment resulted in a growing belief that eternal punishment served no useful purpose. Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72) argued that the idea of "heaven" or "eternal life" was simply a projection of a human longing for immortality, without any objective basis.

A more sustained critique of the Christian doctrine of hope was found in the writings of Karl Marx (1818–83). Marx argued that religion in general sought to comfort those undergoing suffering in the present by persuading them of the joy of an afterlife. By doing so, it distracted them from the task of transforming the present world so that suffering could be eliminated. In many ways, Marxism may be regarded as a secularized Christian eschatology, with "the revolution" as a secularized counterpart to "heaven."

Related developments can be discerned within nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism. The idea of a cataclysmic end of history was set to one side, in favor of a doctrine of hope which was grounded in the gradual evolution of humanity toward moral and societal perfection. The Darwinian theory of natural selection, as expressed in popular versions of the theory of evolution, seemed to point to human history, like all of human life, moving upward toward higher and more sophisticated forms. Eschatology came to be relegated to the status of a theological curiosity. The notion of the "kingdom of God," shorn of its New Testament apocalyptic associations, was viewed (for example, by Albrecht Ritschl) as a static realm of moral values, toward which society was steadily advancing through a process of continuous evolution.

The Enlightenment approach was called into question in the closing decade of the nineteenth century by Johannes Weiss (1863–1914) and Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965), who rediscovered the apocalyptic character of the preaching of Jesus, and argued forcefully that the "kingdom of God" was an eschatological notion. Jesus was to be seen not as the moral educator of humanity, but as the proclaimer of the imminent coming of the eschatological kingdom of God. This new emphasis proved to be of decisive importance in bringing about the recovery of eschatology in the twentieth century.

Three general positions are encountered within twentieth-century Christian discussion of the eschatology of the New Testament, as follows. It should be noted that it is the second of the three positions, here described as "inaugurated," which at present seems to command by far the greatest support within New Testament scholarship.

1. *Futurist*. The kingdom of God is something which remains in the future, and will intervene disruptively in the midst of human history.

2. *Inaugurated*. The kingdom of God has begun to exercise its influence within human history, although its full realization and fulfillment lie in the future.
3. *Realized*. The kingdom of God has already been realized in the coming of Jesus.

Jürgen Moltmann: the theology of hope

In 1964, the German Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann (born 1926) published his *Theology of Hope*. This work drew on the insights of Ernst Bloch's remarkable work *The Principle of Hope* (1938–47), which set out a neo-Marxist analysis of human experience, based on the belief that all human culture is moved by a passionate hope for the future that transcends all the alienation of the present. Against this background of a secular vision of hope, often grounded in a Marxist ideology, Moltmann argued the need for the rediscovery of the corporate Christian conception of hope, as a central motivating factor in the life and thought of the individual and the church.

Moltmann's attitude of orientation toward the future, defined and informed by the promises of God, is summarized in slogans such as *spes quaerens intellectum* and *spero, ut intellegam* ("hope seeking understanding" and "I hope, in order that I may understand"). Each of these phrases represents a significant modification of the viewpoint of Anselm of Canterbury, which emphasized the importance of faith, and was summarized in the slogans *fides quaerens intellectum* and *credo, ut intellegam* ("faith seeking understanding" and "I believe, in order that I may understand"). For Moltmann, Christian theology provides a vision of hope through the transforming work of God, which stands in sharp contrast to secular ideas of hope and social transformation.

> If it is hope that maintains and upholds faith and keeps it moving on, if it is hope that draws the believer into the life of love, then it will also be hope that is the mobilizing and driving force of faith's thinking, of its knowledge of and reflections on human nature, history, and society. Faith hopes in order to know what it believes. Hence all its knowledge will be an anticipatory, fragmentary knowledge forming a prelude to the promised future, and as such is committed to hope. … The Christian

hope is directed towards a *novum ultimum*, towards a new creation of all things by the God of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It thereby opens a future outlook that embraces all things, including also death, and into this it can and must also take the limited hopes of a renewal of life, stimulating them, relativizing them, giving them direction.

For Moltmann, the "hope" in question is not individual, existential, or private; it is the public hope of the whole of the creation, as it awaits the renewing work of the "God of hope." It is therefore imperative that Christianity rediscovers its eschatology and realizes its enormous importance to a world which is longing for hope, and seeking that hope outside the Christian tradition. Only by rediscovering its own theology of hope can the church hope to gain a hearing in a secular culture.

Spe Salvi: Benedict XVI on the Christian hope

In late 2007, Pope Benedict XVI issued his encyclical *Spe Salvi*, which took its title from Paul's declaration that "in hope we are saved" (Romans 8:24). (In the Vulgate Latin translation, this reads *spe salvi facti sumus*.) The document represents one of the most important statements on the Christian hope in recent times, offering both a cultural engagement with secular notions of hope, and a restatement of the characteristically Christian approach to the matter.

After a substantial engagement with the idea of hope as found in the New Testament, the encyclical engages secular visions of hope, such as those found in Marxism. Hope was transferred from God to humanity, from the hereafter to the present, from the kingdom of God to the socialist revolution. Yet this secular vision of hope now lies in ruins, confounded by the fact that human nature remains the same. "Theodor W. Adorno formulated the problem of faith in progress quite drastically: he said that progress, seen accurately, is progress from the sling to the atom bomb. … The ambiguity of progress becomes evident. Without doubt, it offers new possibilities for good, but it also opens up appalling possibilities for evil."

In the face of this cultural disillusionment with secular visions of progress, *Spe Salvi* offers a restatement of the Christian vision of hope.

The document is notable, not for its statement of any new ideas, but for its contextualization of traditional eschatological themes. Two of these may be noted: first, the reassertion of the Christian hope as a realistic claim in the light of the failings of the secular vision; and, second, the reaffirmation of the importance of hope in the face of human suffering.

Spe Salvi sets out the Christian hope as a principle which enables human beings to cope with the ambiguities of existence by reaffirming the loving presence of God in life's shadows. It provides a reliable and secure framework within which believing humanity can exist and trust, relying on the unconditional love and commitment of the God who became incarnate in Christ, thus demonstrating that faithfulness and commitment by actions, not merely words. The redeemed life is shaped by faith in "a God who is not a remote 'first cause' of the world," but who entered into history as a pledge of commitment. The "great, true hope which holds firm in spite of all disappointments can only be God – God who has loved us and who continues to love us to the end, until all is accomplished."

The encyclical also addresses the issue of human suffering. Nietzsche accused Christianity of encouraging a mentality which gloried in suffering. *Spe Salvi* takes a more positive approach, noting that the Christian faith has had "the particular merit" of bringing forth within humanity a "new and deeper capacity for these kinds of suffering" that are decisive for our humanity. God suffers for us and with us, an idea that the encyclical refers to as *con-solatio*, "suffering alongside."

> The Christian faith has shown us that truth, justice and love are not simply ideals, but enormously weighty realities. It has shown us that God – Truth and Love in person – desired to suffer for us and with us. Bernard of Clairvaux coined the marvellous expression: *Impassibilis est Deus, sed non incompassibilis* – God cannot suffer, but he can *suffer with.* … Hence in all human suffering we are joined by one who experiences and carries that suffering *with* us; hence *con-solatio* is present in all suffering, the consolation of God's compassionate love.

The encyclical can thus be seen as a reaffirmation of some very traditional Christian ideas, adapted for a post-Enlightenment world. Some, such as Jürgen Moltmann, have expressed concern that the encyclical fails to extend hope beyond the sphere of the church. Moltmann

criticized the omission of reference to "the salvation of a groaning creation and the hope of a new earth where justice dwells." While there is undoubtedly some merit in such criticisms, *Spe Salvi* represents an important contemporary restatement of the Christian hope.

The last things

In the remainder of this concluding chapter, we shall consider aspects of Christian teaching concerning the "last things." These are an integral aspect of Christian life and faith, and have been the subject of considerable theological speculation, especially in popular preaching and writing.

Hell

Interest in the idea and imagery of hell is generally agreed to have reached a climax during the Middle Ages, with artists of the period taking, one assumes, a certain delight in portraying the righteous watching sinners being tormented by burning and other means of torture. Commenting on the enthusiasm with which certain Paris theologians wrote about hell, Erasmus of Rotterdam remarked that they had evidently been there themselves! The most graphic portrayal of the medieval view of hell is that of Dante, in the first of the three books of his *Divine Comedy*. Dante portrays hell as nine circles at the center of the earth, within which Satan dwells. On the gate to hell, Dante notices the inscription "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here!"

The first circle of hell is populated by those who have died without being baptized, and by virtuous pagans. Dante declares that it is this circle that was visited by Christ during his "descent into hell" between the time of the crucifixion and the resurrection. There is no torment of any kind in this circle. As Dante advances further into hell, he discovers those who are guilty of increasingly serious sins. The second circle is populated by the lustful, the third by the gluttonous, the fourth by the miserly, and the fifth by the wrathful. These circles, taken together, constitute "upper hell." At no point does Dante refer to fire in this part of hell. Dante then draws upon Greco-Roman mythology in

suggesting that the River Styx divides "upper hell" from "lower hell." Now we encounter fire for the first time. The sixth circle is populated by heretics, the seventh by the violent, the eighth by fraudsters (including several popes), and the ninth by traitors.

This static medieval view of hell was unquestionably of major influence at the time, and continues to be of importance into the modern period. It may be found clearly stated in Jonathan Edwards's famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," preached on July 8, 1741:

> It would be dreadful to suffer this fierceness and wrath of Almighty God for one moment; but you must suffer it for all eternity. There will be no end to this exquisite horrible misery. … You will know that you must wear out long ages, millions of millions of ages, in wrestling and conflicting with this almighty merciless vengeance.

However, the idea of hell has been subjected to increasing criticism in the last century. The following points are often encountered in modern discussions of the idea.

1. The existence of hell is seen as a contradiction of the Christian assertion of the final victory of God over evil. This criticism is especially associated with the patristic writer Origen, whose doctrine of universal restoration ultimately rests upon an affirmation of the final and total triumph of God over evil. In the modern period, the philosopher Leibniz identified this consideration as a major difficulty with the doctrine of hell:

> It seems strange that, even in the great future of eternity, evil must triumph over good, under the supreme authority of the one who is the sovereign good. After all, there will be many who are called, and yet few who are chosen or saved.

2. The notion of vindictive justice seemed un-Christian to many writers, especially in the light of many New Testament passages speaking of the compassion of God. A number of writers, especially during the nineteenth century, found it difficult to reconcile the idea of a loving God with the notion of the continuing vindictive or retributive punishment of sinners. The main difficulty was that there seemed to be no point to the suffering of the condemned.

While answers may be given to these objections, there has been a perceptible loss of interest in the idea of hell in both popular and more academic Christian circles. Evangelistic preaching now seems to concentrate upon the positive affirmation of the love of God, rather than on the negative implications of the rejection of that love.

Purgatory

One of the major differences between Protestant and Catholic understandings of the "last things" relates to the question of purgatory. Purgatory is perhaps best understood as an intermediate stage, in which those who have died in a state of grace are given an opportunity to purge themselves of the guilt of their sins before finally entering heaven. The idea does not have explicit scriptural warrant, although a passage in 2 Maccabees 12:39–46 (regarded as apocryphal, and hence as lacking in authority, by Protestant writers) speaks of Judas Maccabeus making "propitiation for those who had died, in order that they might be released from their sin."

The idea was developed during the patristic period. Clement of Alexandria and Origen both taught that those who had died without time to perform works of penance would be "purified through fire" in the next life. The practice of praying for the dead – which became widespread in the eastern church in the first four centuries – exercised a major impact upon theological development, and provides an excellent case study of the manner in which liturgy influences theology. What was the point of praying for the dead, it was asked, if those prayers could not alter the state in which they existed? Similar views are found in Augustine, who taught the need for purification from the sins of the present life, before entering the joys of the next.

While the practice of praying for the dead appears to have become well established by the fourth century, the explicit formulation of a notion of "purgatory" seems to date from two centuries later, in the writings of Gregory the Great (ca. 540–604). In his exposition of Matthew 12:32, dating from 593 or 594, Gregory picks up the idea of sins which can be forgiven "in the age to come." He interprets this in terms of a future age in which sins that have not been forgiven on earth may be forgiven subsequently. Note especially the reference

to the "purifying fire" (*purgatorius ignis*), which became incorporated into most medieval accounts of purgatory, and from which the term "purgatory" derives:

> As for certain lesser faults, we must believe that, before the final judgment, there is a purifying fire, for he who is the truth declares that "whoever utters blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be pardoned either in this age, or in the age which is to come" (Matthew 12:32). From this statement, it is to be understood that certain offences can be forgiven in this age, whereas certain others will be forgiven in the age which is to come.

Heaven

The Christian conception of heaven is essentially that of the eschatological realization of the presence and power of God, and the final elimination of sin. The most helpful way of considering it is to regard it as a consummation of the Christian doctrine of salvation, in which the presence, penalty, and power of sin have all been finally eliminated, and the total presence of God in individuals and the community of faith has been achieved.

The New Testament parables of heaven are strongly communal in nature; for example, heaven is portrayed as a banquet, as a wedding feast, or as a city – the new Jerusalem. Individualist interpretations of heaven or eternal life can also be argued to be inadequate, on account of the Christian understanding of God as Trinity. Eternal life is thus not a projection of an individual human existence, but is rather to be seen as sharing, with the redeemed community as a whole, in the community of a loving God.

The term "heaven" is used frequently in the Pauline writings of the New Testament. Although it is natural to think of heaven as a future entity, Paul's thinking appears to embrace both a future reality and a spiritual sphere or realm which coexists with the material world of space and time. Thus "heaven" is referred to both as the future home of the believer (2 Corinthians 5:1–2; Philippians 3:20) and as the present dwelling-place of Jesus Christ from which he will come in final judgment (Romans 10:6; 1 Thessalonians 1:10, 4:16).

Figure 21   Gustav Doré, *The New Jerusalem*, woodcut, ca. 1866.

One of Paul's most significant statements concerning heaven focuses on the notion of believers being "citizens of heaven" (Philippians 3:20) and in some way sharing in the life of heaven in the present. The tension between the "now" and the "not yet" is evident in Paul's statements concerning heaven, making it very difficult to sustain the simple idea of heaven as something which will not come into being until the future, or which cannot be experienced in the present.

Particularly in the Greek-speaking church, speculation focused on the nature of the resurrection body, with Origen (ca. 185–254) soon being established as a leading thinker on this issue. Origen found himself obliged to defend the doctrine of the resurrection against two rival teachings, each of which seemed to him to be perversions of the Christian faith. On the one hand, some writers had argued that the resurrection was simply a reconstitution of the human body, including all of its physical aspects and functions, on the last day. On the other, Gnostic critics of Christianity argued that anything material was evil, and

thus rejected any understanding of the resurrection which included reference to physical elements.

For Origen, it was clear that the resurrection body was a purely spiritual entity. Instead of having physical aspects suitable to life on earth, the resurrection body is adapted to the spiritual life of heaven. In part, this reflected his Platonist presuppositions, most notably the Platonic doctrine of the immortality of the soul.

> By the command of God the body which was earthly and animal will be replaced by a spiritual body, such as may be able to dwell in heaven; even on those who have been of lower worth, even of contemptible, almost negligible merit, the glory and worth of the body will be bestowed in proportion to the deserts of the life and soul of each.

However, Origen also insisted that the resurrection body possessed the same "form" (Greek: *eidos*) as the earthly body. The resurrection thus involved a spiritual transformation without loss of individual identity. However, the approach adopted by Origen seemed to many to involve the radical separation of body and soul. This dualism had its origins in Greek philosophy, rather than in scripture.

According to some of his later critics, Origen's Platonism also shows itself in another aspect of his teaching concerning the resurrection body. In the sixth century, the Roman emperor Justinian criticized Origen for teaching that the resurrection body was spherical. In his dialogue *Timaeus*, Plato had argued that the sphere was the perfect shape, and it is thus possible that Origen may have included this belief in his teaching. However, there is no explicit mention of this notion in any of Origen's known writings.

This type of approach is found in a modified version in the writings of Methodius of Olympus (died ca. 311), one of Origen's more severe critics. Methodius argued that Origen could not really speak of "the resurrection of the body," for the simple reason that it was not the body that was raised, but some elusive "form." In his dialogue with Aglaophon, dating from around 300, Methodius offers another approach, which retains an emphasis on the physical reality of the future resurrection of the body, based on the analogy of the melting down and recasting of a metal statue. Imagine, he suggests, a skilled artist who casts a gold figure which is "beautifully proportioned in all its features" – but

then realizes it has been defaced by a rival. The only option is to melt the statue down, and recast it, so that it can once more be "totally free from any defect." The resurrection, he argues, is God's way of reconstituting the human body, free of defects and distortions.

> God dissolved humanity once more into its original materials, so that it could be remodeled in such a way that all its defects could be eliminated and disappear. Now the melting down of a statue corresponds to the death and dissolution of the human body, and the remolding of the material to the resurrection after death.

One aspect of the Christian expectation of heaven merits especial attention in closing this chapter: the beatific vision. The Christian is finally granted a full vision of the God who has up to this point been known only in part. This vision of God in the full splendor of the divine majesty has been a constant theme of much Christian theology, especially during the Middle Ages. Dante's *Divine Comedy* concludes with the poet finally capturing a glimpse of God: "the love which moves the sun and the other stars." The anticipation of the wonder and glory of this vision was seen as a powerful incentive to keep going in the Christian life. As the English poet John Donne (1572–1631) put it three centuries later: "No man ever saw God and lived. And yet, I shall not live till I see God; and when I have seen him, I shall never die."

Figure 22 John Donne, painting by Isaac Oliver, 1615. AKG Images.

Engaging with a text

One of the most interesting texts dealing with the Christian concept of heaven was written by Cyprian of Carthage in the third century. In his treatise *On Mortality*, Cyprian reflected on the fragility of human life, and how the hope of heaven gave stability and hope in the face

of uncertainties. Much of the Roman empire – including the cities of Rome and Carthage – were afflicted by disease (possibly smallpox), leading to large death tolls. In the treatise, Cyprian notes that some Christians were puzzled by the indiscriminate nature of the disease, which affected both pagans and Christians. In addition, localized persecutions were launched specifically against Christian communities by the Roman authorities. Cyprian himself was martyred in 258. With this background in mind, Cyprian wrote *On Mortality* to set death in context, within the Christian vision of the hope of heaven.

> We should always consider, dearly beloved brothers and sisters, that we have renounced the world, and are in the meantime living here as guests and strangers. Let us greet the day which sees each of us return to our own homes, which snatches us from here and sets us free from the snares of the world, and restores us to paradise and the kingdom. Which of us, when placed in foreign lands, does not want to hurry back to our own country? Who that is eager to return to his friends would not earnestly desire a prosperous gale, so that he might the sooner embrace those dear to him? We regard paradise as our native land. We have already begun to consider the patriarchs as our parents. Why do we not hasten and run, so that we may catch sight of our native land, and greet our parents? There a great number of our dear ones await us, and a thick crowd of parents, brothers, children, is longing for us, already assured of their own safety, and still anxious for our salvation. To attain to their presence and their embrace – what a joy, both for them and for us!

The fundamental theme is that going to heaven is like returning home. Cyprian draws on contemporary Roman writings – such as Cicero's "Dream of Scipio" – which describe the reunion of families in paradise, and uses these as a model for his own approach.

You may find the following questions helpful in interacting with this text, either on your own or in a group discussion.

1. Notice how Cyprian describes Christians as "guests and strangers" in the world. These images point to believers passing through the world, not really belonging to it. The main point that Cyprian wants to make is that Christians do not belong in

the world; their real home lies elsewhere. Anyone who has been away from home for an extended period longs to return home. For Christians, death marks the process by which this homeward journey is initiated.

2. Find the following sentence in this extract: "We regard paradise as our native land." At several points in this treatise, Cyprian refers to paradise as the *patria* of Christians. This Latin term – which is probably best translated as "homeland" or "native land" – had rich cultural associations for Roman citizens, who might serve in overseas outposts such as Carthage, but longed to return to their homes in Rome.

3. Cyprian uses the image of the *patria* to make two points. First, that Christians have the right to return to their homeland – an idea which the New Testament expresses in terms of being "citizens of heaven." Second, Cyprian highlights the emotional aspects of the idea of returning home to emphasize the joy that they will experience in heaven. Can you identify points in the extract where these points emerge?

4. Unusually, Cyprian makes little reference to God in this passage. The believer's joy on entering paradise is presented mainly in terms of meeting family members. The extract is taken from the concluding section of the treatise, and there was little reference to either God or the risen Christ in its earlier sections. How might this be explained?

This discussion of the Christian hope brings to an end this brief exploration of the basics of Christian theology. I hope that you have found this helpful, although I know many readers will be frustrated about the effects of limits of space on what can be discussed. So where might you go next if you want to take your thinking further? In "Moving On," I will offer some brief suggestions.

Moving On

This short introduction to the basics of Christian theology has aimed to encourage its readers by showing you that you can cope with exploring some of its leading ideas, and interact with some of its seminal texts. It has also attempted to whet your appetite to know more, so that you will end this book feeling dissatisfied. This is all that a short book like this can hope to achieve when dealing with so rich and complex a subject as Christian theology.

It will be obvious that this very basic introduction to Christian theology has many weaknesses, most due to limitations on space. For a start, only a few theological topics have been examined. Many others need to be covered – including, for example, the doctrines of grace, human nature, and Christian understandings of the place of other religions. Questions of "theological method" have also been treated very superficially. A much more extensive discussion of, for example, the sources and norms of theology is required.

Another serious weakness is that hardly any historical contextualization has been provided. Both Martin Luther and John Calvin are introduced to readers; they are not, however, explained and examined in the light of the rise of the European Renaissance, and the origins of the Protestant Reformation. Thomas Aquinas is also introduced – but there has not been enough space to explain how the movement known as "scholastic theology" developed, and sketch its leading features. The Pelagian controversy is mentioned briefly – but it is not

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explained in any detail, nor located in its historical context. A much longer introductory text is required to do justice to the subject. This book represents a good start – but it is only a handshake to start a much longer conversation.

So where should you go next? Completing this book will be as far as some of its readers will wish to go in their theological explorations. But others will want to go much further. Perhaps they have chosen to read this book as an experiment – to see if there is any point in taking things further. If you were able to cope with this book, you will be able to handle the more extensive and comprehensive analysis in my more substantial work *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, now in its sixth edition. This shorter book was planned and written in such a way that it could lead into this much more thorough engagement with the history, ideas, and methods of Christian theology. You will find that your basic knowledge of theology will make this much more extensive encounter with this most fascinating discipline easier and more satisfying.

Christian Theology is designed to be used in a variety of contexts, including individual private study, taught courses, and group study. It has become the field-specific bestseller in the English-speaking academic and seminary communities, and has been translated into nine languages. Its three major sections provide an overview of the history of Christian theology, its sources and methods, and its fundamental ideas. If you want to know more, this is the place to go.

You may also find the accompanying volume *The Christian Theology Reader* useful. This work, now in its fifth edition, contains more than 350 readings, each with its own individual introduction, commentary, and study questions. Each has been tested on readers, to ensure that it can be easily understood. If you felt encouraged by the textual engagements offered in every chapter of this basic introduction, you will be able to handle and benefit from the much more extensive coverage provided by this larger work.

But some of my readers will choose to end their studies here. If so, I would like to thank you for allowing me to accompany you on your exploration of theology, and wish you well in the future. Perhaps I might quote from Karl Barth in bidding you farewell at this point, and

encouraging you to see theology as something that is helpful for the individual life of faith, as well as for the life and witness of the church.

> Theology is not a private subject for theologians only. Nor is it a private subject for professors. Fortunately, there have always been pastors who have understood more about theology than most professors. Nor is theology a private subject of study for pastors. Fortunately, there have repeatedly been congregation members, and often whole congregations, who have pursued theology energetically while their pastors were theological infants or barbarians. Theology is a matter for the Church.

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Brief Glossary of Theological Terms

What follows is a brief discussion of some technical terms you will have encountered in the course of reading this text, or which arise from it.

adoptionism
The heretical view that Jesus was "adopted" as the Son of God at some point during his ministry (usually his baptism), as opposed to the orthodox teaching that Jesus was Son of God by nature from the moment of his conception.

Anabaptism
A term derived from the Greek word for "re-baptizer," and used to refer to the radical wing of the sixteenth-century Reformation, based on thinkers such as Menno Simons or Balthasar Hubmaier.

analogy of being (*analogia entis*)
The theory, especially associated with Thomas Aquinas, that there exists a correspondence or analogy between the created order and God, as a result of the divine creatorship. The idea gives theoretical justification to the practice of drawing conclusions from the known objects and relationships of the natural order concerning God.

analogy of faith (*analogia fidei*)
The theory, especially associated with Karl Barth, which holds that any correspondence between the created order and God is only established on the basis of the self-revelation of God.

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ancilla theologiae

A Latin phrase, meaning "the handmaid of theology," which is used to refer to the practice of using philosophical or cultural ideas as a helpmate or dialogue partner for Christian theology.

apostolic era

The period of the Christian church, regarded as definitive by many, bounded by the resurrection of Jesus Christ (ca. AD 35) and the death of the last apostle (ca. AD 90). The ideas and practices of this period were widely regarded as being authoritative, at least in some sense or to some degree, in many church circles.

appropriation

A term relating to the doctrine of the Trinity, which affirms that while all three persons of the Trinity are active in all the outward actions of the Trinity, it is appropriate to think of those actions as being the particular work of one of the persons. Thus it is appropriate to think of creation as the work of the Father, or redemption as the work of the Son, despite the fact that all three persons are present and active in both these works.

Arianism

A major early Christological heresy, which treated Jesus Christ as the supreme of God's creatures, and denied his divine status. The Arian controversy was of major importance in the development of Christology during the fourth century.

atonement

An English term originally coined in 1526 by William Tyndale to translate the Latin term *reconciliatio*, and which has since come to have the developed meaning of "the work of Christ" or "the benefits of Christ gained for believers by his death and resurrection."

Barthian

An adjective used to describe the theological outlook of the Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968), and noted chiefly for its emphasis

upon the priority of revelation and its focus upon Jesus Christ. The terms "neo-Orthodoxy" and "dialectical theology" are also used in this connection.

beatific vision

A term used, especially in Roman Catholic theology, to refer to the full vision of God, which is allowed only to the elect after death. However, some writers, including Thomas Aquinas, taught that certain favored individuals – such as Moses and Paul – were allowed this vision in the present life.

Calvinism

An ambiguous term, used with two quite distinct meanings. First, it refers to the religious ideas of religious bodies (such as the Reformed church) and individuals (such as Theodore Beza) who were profoundly influenced by John Calvin, or by documents written by him. Second, it refers to the religious ideas of John Calvin himself. Although the first sense is by far the more common, there is a growing recognition that the term is misleading.

Cappadocian Fathers

A term used to refer collectively to three major Greek-speaking writers of the patristic period: Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa, all of whom date from the late fourth century. "Cappadocia" designates an area in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) in which these writers were based.

Cartesianism

The philosophical outlook especially associated with René Descartes (1596–1650), particularly in relation to its emphasis on the separation of the knower from the known, and its insistence that the existence of the individual thinking self is the proper starting point for philosophical reflection.

catechism

A popular manual of Christian doctrine, usually in the form of questions and answers, intended for religious instruction.

Catholic

An adjective which is used both to refer to the universality of the church in space and time, and also to a particular church body (sometimes also known as the Roman Catholic church) which lays emphasis upon this point.

Chalcedonian definition

The formal declaration at the Council of Chalcedon that Jesus Christ was to be regarded as having two natures, one human and one divine.

charisma, charismatic

A set of terms especially associated with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In medieval theology, the term "charisma" is used to designate a spiritual gift, conferred upon individuals by the grace of God. Since the early twentieth century, the term "charismatic" has come to refer to styles of theology and worship which place particular emphasis upon the immediate presence and experience of the Holy Spirit.

Christology

The section of Christian theology dealing with the identity of Jesus Christ, particularly the question of the relation of his human and divine natures.

consubstantial

A Latin term, deriving from the Greek term *homoousios*, literally meaning "of the same substance." The term is used to affirm the full divinity of Jesus Christ, particularly in opposition to Arianism.

creed

A formal definition or summary of the Christian faith, held in common by all Christians. The most important are those generally known as the "Apostles' Creed" and the "Nicene Creed."

deism

A term used to refer to the views of a group of English writers, especially during the seventeenth century, the rationalism of which

anticipated many of the ideas of the Enlightenment. The term is often used to refer to a view of God which recognizes the divine creatorship, yet which rejects the notion of a continuing divine involvement with the world.

Docetism
An early Christological heresy, which treated Jesus Christ as a purely divine being who only had the "appearance" of being human.

Donatism
A movement, centering upon Roman North Africa in the fourth century, which developed a view of the church and sacraments which placed a strong emphasis on the need for personal holiness on the part of church members and their ministers, and on the need for measures to enforce this where necessary.

Ebionitism
An early Christological heresy, which treated Jesus Christ as a purely human figure, although recognizing that he was endowed with particular charismatic gifts which distinguished him from other humans.

ecclesiology
The section of Christian theology dealing with the theory of the church.

Enlightenment, the
A term used since the nineteenth century to refer to the emphasis upon human reason and autonomy, characteristic of much of western European and North American thought during the eighteenth century.

eschatology
The section of Christian theology dealing with the "end things," especially the ideas of resurrection, hell, and eternal life.

eucharist
The term used in the present volume to refer to the sacrament variously known as "the Mass," "the Lord's Supper," and "holy communion."

exegesis

The science of textual interpretation, usually referring specifically to the Bible. The term "biblical exegesis" basically means "the process of interpreting the Bible." The specific techniques employed in the exegesis of scripture are usually referred to as "hermeneutics."

exemplarism

A particular approach to the atonement, which stresses the moral or religious example set to believers by Jesus Christ.

five ways, the

A standard term for the five "arguments for the existence of God" associated with Thomas Aquinas.

homoousion

A Greek term, literally meaning "of the same substance," which came to be used extensively during the fourth century to designate the main-line Christological belief that Jesus Christ was "of the same substance of God." The term was polemical, being directed against the Arian view that Christ was "of similar substance" (*homoiousios*) to God. *See also* "consubstantial."

incarnation

A term used to refer to the assumption of human nature by God, in the person of Jesus Christ. The term "incarnationalism" is often used to refer to theological approaches which lay especial emphasis upon God becoming human.

logos

A Greek term meaning "word," which played a crucial role in the development of patristic Christology. Jesus Christ was recognized as the "Word of God"; the question concerned the implications of this recognition, and especially the way in which the divine "logos" in Jesus Christ related to his human nature.

modalism

A trinitarian heresy, which treats the three persons of the Trinity as different "modes" of the Godhead. A typical modalist approach is to

regard God as active as Father in creation, as Son in redemption, and as Spirit in sanctification.

monophysitism
The doctrine that there is only one nature in Christ, which is divine (from the Greek words *monos*, "only one," and *physis*, "nature"). This view differed from the orthodox view, upheld by the Council of Chalcedon (451), that Christ had two natures, one divine and one human.

orthodoxy
A term used in a number of senses, of which the following are the most important: orthodoxy in the sense of "right belief," as opposed to heresy; Orthodoxy in the sense of the forms of Christianity which are dominant in Russia and Greece; orthodoxy in the sense of a movement within Protestantism, especially in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, which laid emphasis upon need for doctrinal definition.

parousia
A Greek term, which literally means "coming" or "arrival," used to refer to the second coming of Christ. The notion of the *parousia* is an important aspect of Christian understandings of the "last things."

patristic
An adjective used to refer to the first centuries in the history of the church, following the writing of the New Testament (the "patristic period"), or thinkers writing during this period (the "patristic writers"). For many writers, the period thus designated seems to be ca. 100–451 (in other words, the period between the completion of the last of the New Testament writings and the landmark Council of Chalcedon).

Pelagianism
An understanding of how humans are able to merit their salvation which is diametrically opposed to that of Augustine of Hippo, placing considerable emphasis upon the role of human works and playing down the idea of divine grace.

perichoresis

A term relating to the doctrine of the Trinity, often also referred to by the Latin term *circumincessio*. The basic notion is that all three persons of the Trinity mutually share in the life of the others, so that none is isolated or detached from the actions of the others.

radical Reformation

A term used with increasing frequency to refer to the Anabaptist movement – in other words, the wing of the Reformation which went beyond what Luther and Zwingli envisaged, particularly in relation to the doctrine of the church.

reformed

A term used to refer to a tradition of theology which draws inspiration from the writings of John Calvin (1510–64) and his successors. The term is now generally used in preference to "Calvinist."

schism

A deliberate break with the unity of the church, condemned vigorously by influential writers of the early church, such as Cyprian and Augustine.

scholasticism

A particular approach to Christian theology, associated especially with the Middle Ages, which lays emphasis upon the rational justification and systematic presentation of Christian theology.

soteriology

The section of Christian theology dealing with the doctrine of salvation (Greek: *soteria*).

transubstantiation

The doctrine according to which the bread and the wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ in the eucharist, while retaining their outward appearance.

Trinity
The distinctively Christian doctrine of God, which reflects the complexity of the Christian experience of God. The doctrine is usually summarized in maxims such as "three persons, one God."

two natures, doctrine of
A term generally used to refer to the doctrine of the two natures, human and divine, of Jesus Christ. Related terms include "Chalcedonian definition" and "hypostatic union."

Details of Theologians Cited

Abelard   *see* Peter Abelard

Anselm of Canterbury (ca. 1033–1109)   Born in Italy, Anselm migrated to Normandy in 1059, entering the famous monastery of Bec, becoming its prior in 1063, and abbot in 1078. In 1093 he was appointed archbishop of Canterbury. He is chiefly noted for his strong defense of the intellectual foundations of Christianity, and is especially associated with the "ontological argument" for the existence of God.

Aquinas   *see* Thomas Aquinas

Arius (ca. 250–ca. 336)   The originator of Arianism, a form of Christology which refused to concede the full divinity of Christ. Little is known of his life, and little has survived of his writings. With the exception of a letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia, his views are known mainly through the writings of his opponents.

Athanasius of Alexandria (ca. 296–373)   One of the most significant defenders of orthodox Christology during the period of the Arian controversy. Elected as bishop of Alexandria in 328, he was forced to resign on account of his opposition to Arianism. Although he was widely supported in the west, his views were finally recognized after his death at the Council of Constantinople (381).

Augustine of Hippo (354–430)   Widely regarded as the most influential Latin patristic writer, Augustine was converted to Christianity at the northern Italian city of Milan in the summer of 386. He returned to North Africa, and was made bishop of Hippo in 395. He was involved in two major controversies – the Donatist controversy, focusing on the church and sacraments, and the Pelagian controversy, focusing on grace and sin. He also made substantial contributions to the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, and the Christian understanding of history.

Barth, Karl (1886–1968)   Widely regarded as the most important Protestant theologian of the twentieth century. Barth moved away from liberal Protestantism during the First World War and adopted a theological position which placed an emphasis on the priority of divine revelation. His early emphasis on the "otherness" of God in his Romans commentary (1919) was continued and modified in his monumental *Church Dogmatics*. Barth's contribution to modern Christian theology has been immense.

Basil of Caesarea (ca. 330–79)   Also known as "Basil the Great," this fourth-century writer was based in the region of Cappadocia, in modern Turkey. He is particularly remembered for his writings on the Trinity, especially the distinctive role of the Holy Spirit. He was elected bishop of Caesarea in 370.

Baxter, Richard (1615–91)   One of the most important English Puritan theologians.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich (1906–45)   A German Lutheran theologian, influenced by Karl Barth, with a particular interest in ecumenical work during the 1930s. He was arrested in 1943, and hanged by the Nazis in 1945. His letters and papers from prison include significant discussions of the suffering of God, and the need for theology to relate to a "religionless society."

Brunner, Emil (1889–1966)   A Swiss theologian who, while being influenced by his fellow countryman Karl Barth, developed ideas on natural theology which distanced them during the later 1930s. He is particularly noted for his strongly personalist idea of revelation.

Bucer, Martin (1491–1551)   German reformer of the sixteenth century, noted for his contributions to biblical hermeneutics, ecclesiology, and the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

Bultmann, Rudolf (1884–1976)   A German Lutheran writer, who was appointed to a chair of theology at Marburg in 1921. He is chiefly noted for his program of "demythologization" of the New Testament, and his use of existential ideas in the exposition of the twentieth-century meaning of the gospel.

Cabasilas, Nicholas (born ca. 1322)   Byzantine theologian who is remembered especially for his "Concerning Life in Christ," which elaborates the way in which the believer achieves union with Christ.

Calvin, John (1509–64)   Leading Protestant reformer, especially associated with the city of Geneva. His *Institutes of the Christian Religion* has become one of the most influential works of Protestant theology, and done much to shape the contours of reformed theology.

Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–ca. 215)   A leading Alexandrian writer, with a particular concern to explore the relation between Christian thought and Greek philosophy, especially the forms of Platonism predominant at that time.

Cyprian of Carthage (died 258)   A Roman rhetorician of considerable skill who was converted to Christianity around 246, and elected bishop of the North African city of Carthage in 248. He was martyred in that city in 258. His writings focus particularly on the unity of the church, and the role of its bishops in maintaining orthodoxy and order.

Cyril of Jerusalem (ca. 315–86)   Major fourth-century theologian, noted particularly for his defense of Nicene orthodoxy. His "catechetical lectures" were of great importance in the teaching of theology.

Descartes, René (1596–1650)   French philosopher noted for his emphasis on the role of systematic doubt, and the importance of "perfection" in discussion of the nature of God.

Didymus the Blind (ca. 313–98)   Leading Alexandrian theologian of the fourth century, remembered chiefly for his biblical commentaries.

Edwards, Jonathan (1703–58)   Leading American theologian in the Reformed tradition, noted especially for his metaphysical defense of Christianity in the light of the increasingly influential ideas of the Enlightenment, and his positive statements of traditional Reformed doctrines.

Gore, Charles (1853–1932)   Major English theologian of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly noted for his contributions to Christology.

Gregory of Nazianzus (329–89)   Also known as "Gregory Nazianzen." He is particularly remembered for his "Five Theological Orations," written around 380, and a compilation of extracts from the writings of Origen, which he entitled the *Philokalia*.

Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 330–ca. 395)   Leading Cappadocian Father, with a special interest in the relation of Christian theology and Platonic philosophy.

Gregory the Great (ca. 540–604)   Also known as Gregory I. He was elected as pope in 590, and did much to establish the political power of the papacy, which reached its zenith in the Middle Ages. As a theologian, he is particularly noted for his pastoral and exegetical works.

Hugh of St. Victor (died 1142)   A theologian, of Flemish or German origin, who entered the Augustinian monastery of St. Victor in Paris around 1115. His most important work is *De Sacramentis Christianae Fidei* ("On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith"), which shows awareness of the new theological debates which were beginning to develop at this time.

Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 35–ca. 107)   A major early Christian martyr, noted for his letters to Christian churches in Asia Minor. Of

particular interest is his vigorous defense of the reality of Christ's human nature and sufferings, in the face of those who wished to maintain that they were simply an appearance.

Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 130–ca. 200)   Probably a native of Asia Minor, who was elected as bishop of the southern French city of Lyons around 178. He is chiefly noted for his major writing *Adversus Haereses* ("Against the heresies"), which defended the Christian faith against Gnostic misrepresentations and criticisms.

Jenson, Robert (born 1930)   North America's leading Lutheran theologian, noted for his major contributions to the doctrine of the Trinity.

Julian of Norwich (ca. 1342–ca. 1415)   Little is known of the life of this English mystic, apart from the details she herself provides in her *Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love*. For at least part of her active life, she lived a solitary life in the city of Norwich.

Justin Martyr (ca. 100–ca. 165)   One of the most noted of the Christian apologists of the second century, with a concern to demonstrate the moral and intellectual credibility of Christianity in a pagan world. His *First Apology* stresses the manner in which Christianity brings to fulfillment the insights of classical philosophy.

Lombard   *see* Peter Lombard

Luther, Martin (1483–1546)   Perhaps the greatest figure in the European Reformation, noted particularly for his doctrine of justification by faith alone, and his strongly Christocentric understanding of revelation. His "theology of the cross" aroused much interest in the late twentieth century. Luther's famous Ninety-Five Theses on indulgences (October 1517) are generally regarded as marking the beginning of the Reformation.

Melanchthon, Philip (1497–1560)   A noted early Lutheran theologian, and close personal associate of Martin Luther. He was responsible for the systematization of early Lutheran theology, particularly through

his *Loci Communes* (first edition published in 1521) and his "Apology for the Augsburg Confession."

Methodius of Olympus (died ca. 311)   A noted critic of Origen's theology, particularly the doctrines of the transmigration of souls and a purely spiritual resurrection body. His treatise on the resurrection develops the thesis of the continuity between the pre- and post-resurrection bodies.

Moltmann, Jürgen (b. 1926)   One of the most influential of modern German Protestant theologians, particularly noted for his writings on the "suffering of God," as well as his exploration of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Origen (ca. 185–ca. 254)   Leading representative of the Alexandrian school of theology, especially noted for his allegorical exposition of scripture, and his use of Platonic ideas in theology, particularly Christology.

Paley, William (1734–1805)   Leading English exponent of natural theology and the argument from design.

Pannenberg, Wolfhart (1928-2014).   Leading German Lutheran theologian, particularly noted for his early work on Christology.

Pascal, Blaise (1623–62)   An influential French Roman Catholic writer, who gained a considerable reputation as a mathematician and theologian. After a religious conversion experience in 1646, he developed an approach to his faith which was strongly Christocentric and experiential. His most famous writing is the collection known as the *Pensées*, first gathered together in 1670, some years after his death.

Peter Abelard (1079–1142)   French theologian, who achieved a considerable reputation as a teacher at the University of Paris. Among his many contributions to the development of medieval theology, his most noted is his emphasis upon the subjective aspects of the atonement.

Peter Lombard (ca. 1100–60)   A noted medieval theologian, active at the University of Paris, who was appointed bishop of Paris in 1159. His most significant achievement was the compilation of the textbook known as the *Four Books of the Sentences*, a collection of extracts from patristic writers.

Plantinga, Alvin (born 1932)   American philosopher of religion widely credited as a major influence of the resurgence of the philosophy of religion in American academic culture in the 1980s and onwards.

Rahner, Karl (1904–84)   One of the most influential of modern Roman Catholic theologians, whose *Theological Investigations* pioneered the use of the essay as a tool of theological construction and exploration.

Rufinus of Aquileia (ca. 345–410)   Although born in Italy, this writer eventually settled in Egypt. He is best known for his exposition of the creed.

Sayers, Dorothy L. (1893–1957)   English novelist and dramatist, with a strong interest in Christian theology.

Temple, William (1881–1944)   Leading English theologian of the first half of the twentieth century, who served as archbishop of Canterbury from 1942-4.

Tertullian (ca. 160–ca. 225)   A major figure in early Latin theology, who produced a series of significant controversial and apologetic writings. He is particularly noted for his ability to coin new Latin terms to translate the emerging theological vocabulary of the Greek-speaking eastern church.

Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225–74)   Probably the most famous and influential theologian of the Middle Ages. Born in Italy, he achieved his fame through his teaching and writing at the University of Paris and other northern universities. His fame rests chiefly on his *Summa*

Theologiae, composed towards the end of his life and not totally finished at the time of his death. However, he also wrote many other significant works, particularly the *Summa contra Gentiles*, which represents a major statement of the rationality of the Christian faith.

Thomas à Kempis (ca. 1380–1471)   A leading representative of the *Devotio Moderna*, a medieval devotional movement in the Netherlands, who is widely accepted to be the author of the classic work of spirituality known as the *Imitatio Christi* ("The Imitation of Christ").

Tillich, Paul (1886–1965)   A German Lutheran theologian who was forced to leave Germany during the Nazi period, and settled in the United States. He held teaching positions at Union Theological Seminary, New York, Harvard Divinity School, and the University of Chicago. His most significant theological writing is the three-volume *Systematic Theology* (1951–64).

Turrettini, François (1623–87)   Reformed theologian of Italian origin, who became professor of theology at the Genevan Academy in 1653. He is regarded as one of the leading representatives of Calvinist thought during this period.

Vincent of Lérins (died before 450)   A French theologian who settled on the island of Lérins. He is particularly noted for his emphasis on the role of tradition in guarding against innovations in the doctrine of the church, and is credited with the formulation of the so-called "Vincentian canon."

Wesley, Charles (1707–88)   English writer of hymns and theologian, noted for his Pietist emphases and hostility to Calvinism. Along with his brother John, he contributed to a significant revival within eighteenth-century English Christianity.

Wesley, John (1703–91)   English theologian, pastor, and hymn-writer, remembered especially as the founder of Methodism. Like his brother Charles, he was deeply influenced by Pietism, which had a considerable impact on his early theology. His theology found its expression in hymns and sermons, rather than works of systematic theology.

Zinzendorf, Nikolaus Ludwig von (1700–60)   A German writer who reacted against the rationalism of the theology of his day, and emphasized the emotional and experiential aspects of Christian faith. There is a clear connection between Zinzendorf's ideas and those of Pietism. He is remembered especially as the founder of a religious community at Herrnhut.

Zwingli, Huldrych (1484–1531)   Also known as "Ulrich Zwingli." A leading Swiss reformer, particularly associated with the vigorous denial of the real presence of Christ at the eucharist, a view usually designated "Zwinglianism." He died in battle, as a result of his attempts to spread his reforming ideas in his native Switzerland.

Sources of Citations

To help you follow through on any extended citations within the text that you find interesting, we have provided details of their sources so that you can study them in their original context in greater depth. Many of these citations come from readings that are included in Alister McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader*, 5th edition (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016). Where this is the case, a reference is given in brackets to this work. For example, the reference:

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indicates that this text is "Reading 2.2" in the fifth edition of *The Christian Theology Reader* – in other words, the second reading in chapter 2 of this collection of texts, dealing with the sources of Christian theology. Note that only extracted quotes are sourced.

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p. xiii: "Theology may be defined …"

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p. xxxiii: "We believe that the Word …"

Gallic Confession of Faith (1559), article 3. This document is also known as the "French Confession of Faith."

p. xxxiii: "God is the author of Sacred Scripture. …"

Catechism of the Catholic Church (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, and other publishers, 1994), paras. 105–6.

p. xxxv: "Everyone who wishes to perceive the truth …"

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p. xxxvii: "If those who are called philosophers …"

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Chapter 1: Faith

p. 2: "[Faith] affects the whole of [human] nature. …"

W. H. Griffith-Thomas, *The Principles of Theology* (London: Longmans, 1930), p. xviii.

p. 3: "For nothing worthy proving can be proven …"

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p. 9: "The centre of my faith …"

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p. 10: "Where there is the Word of the God …"

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p. 17: "Now we shall have a right definition of faith …"

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Chapter 2: God

p. 26: "The aspect of fatherly care …"

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p. 27: "God as mother does not mean …"

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p. 27: "I saw that God rejoices …"

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p. 29: "Aristotle does not and could not …"

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p. 34: "God lets himself be pushed out …"

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p. 37: "By calling God "Father" …"

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Chapter 3: Creation

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p. 50: "The image of the creator …"

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p. 53: "Meditation on [God's] works …"

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p. 59: "We know [God] in two manners. …"

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Chapter 4: Jesus

p. 72: "The Word of God came …"

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p. 73: "We all with one voice confess …"

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p. 87: "For Judah's lion bursts his chains …"
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p. 89: "[Christ], being truly of God the Father …"
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p. 90: "From our nature …"
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p. 101: "No condemnation now I dread …"

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p. 121: "We believe that …"

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